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THE LED ZEPPELIN GUITAR GOD'S FIREBIRD III COMES TO LIGHT

+

U2's THE EDGE
ON GOING ACOUSTIC FOR NEW ALBUM 'SONGS OF SURRENDER'

Guitarist

Issue 501

SUMMER 2023

ULTIMATE STRATS

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SUPER DISTORTION
HOW DIMARZIO INVENTED HOT PICKUPS

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THE ESSENTIAL STRAT MODS
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1963 Fender STRATOCASTER
Foam Green

Interviews

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PLUS
PRS MODERN EAGLE V
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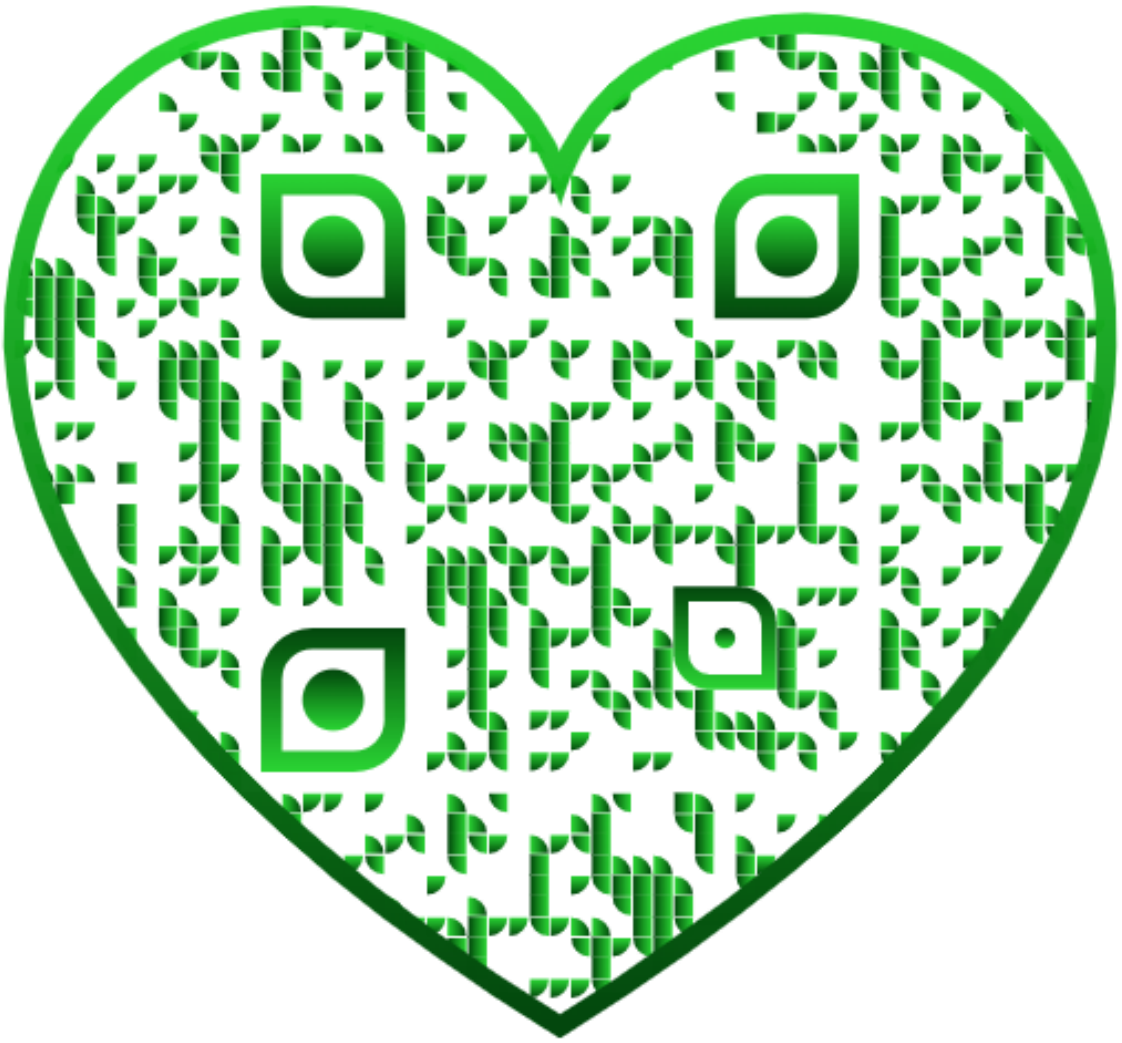

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Stratospheric Success

Ask any guitarist what they would choose if they could only have one electric guitar to cover all gigs, and chances are they'll say a Strat. And it's not hard to see why – it's got a few more tones in it than a Tele, but, with a bit of help from overdrive, it can rock as hard as a Les Paul. And yet the near-universal popularity of the Strat wasn't a given. In the late 60s, the Tele was outselling it and it took Hendrix to turn the tide – after Jimi, everyone wanted one.

Today, most players have owned a Strat (or a guitar closely based on one) at some point or another. Despite this, I sometimes feel the Stratocaster is the most elusive of all electrics, when it comes to pinning down its true character. Some Strats are dainty and springy, others are bruisers with brooding, volcanic power. Just think of Hendrix's dumbfoundingly powerful performance of *The Star-Spangled Banner* at Woodstock and you'll know what I mean. Compare that with Hank Marvin's tone on *Wonderful Land* and you might almost be listening to two different instruments.

I'm not sure the same mercurial qualities could be claimed of 335s, for example – as much as I love them. Like the human frame, the Strat's ageless design seems to accommodate all characters. Maybe that's why it continues to be relevant to such a wide range of musicians. Of course, it's not a perfect design – Huw Price's Strat modding feature on page 66 is a great place to start if you want to enhance the already capable Fullerton formula or simply tailor it a little more closely to your needs.

The relative complexity of the Strat's electronics, as compared with those of the twin-pickup Tele, also means gear makers have had plenty of scope to evolve its three-pickup sound over the years. Bare Knuckle Pickups' Tim Mills utilised all of the techniques in the pickup-maker's art to produce the intriguing new Triptych Strat set for contemporary rocker Rabea Massaad (see page 70), showing there's still room for evolution in Fender's near-70-year-old platform yet. Enjoy the issue and see you again next month.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

Editor's Highlights

Going For Gold

Huw Price untangles the complicated story of the family of pickups we know as 'Gold Foils', which are more popular than ever, on **p120**

Mass Boutique

The partnership of revered boutique acoustic maker Dana Bourgeois with giant Chinese maker Eastman has yielded superb results **p92**

Super Distortion

We talk tone with Larry Dimarzio and learn how he invented the market for hot replacement pickups back in the innovative 1970s **p108**

COVER IMAGES: COVER IMAGE BY PHIL BARKER; THE EDGE PHOTO BY OLAF HEINE STUDIO

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- Mark Lettieri
PRS PAUL REED SMITH GUITARS

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Phil Barker

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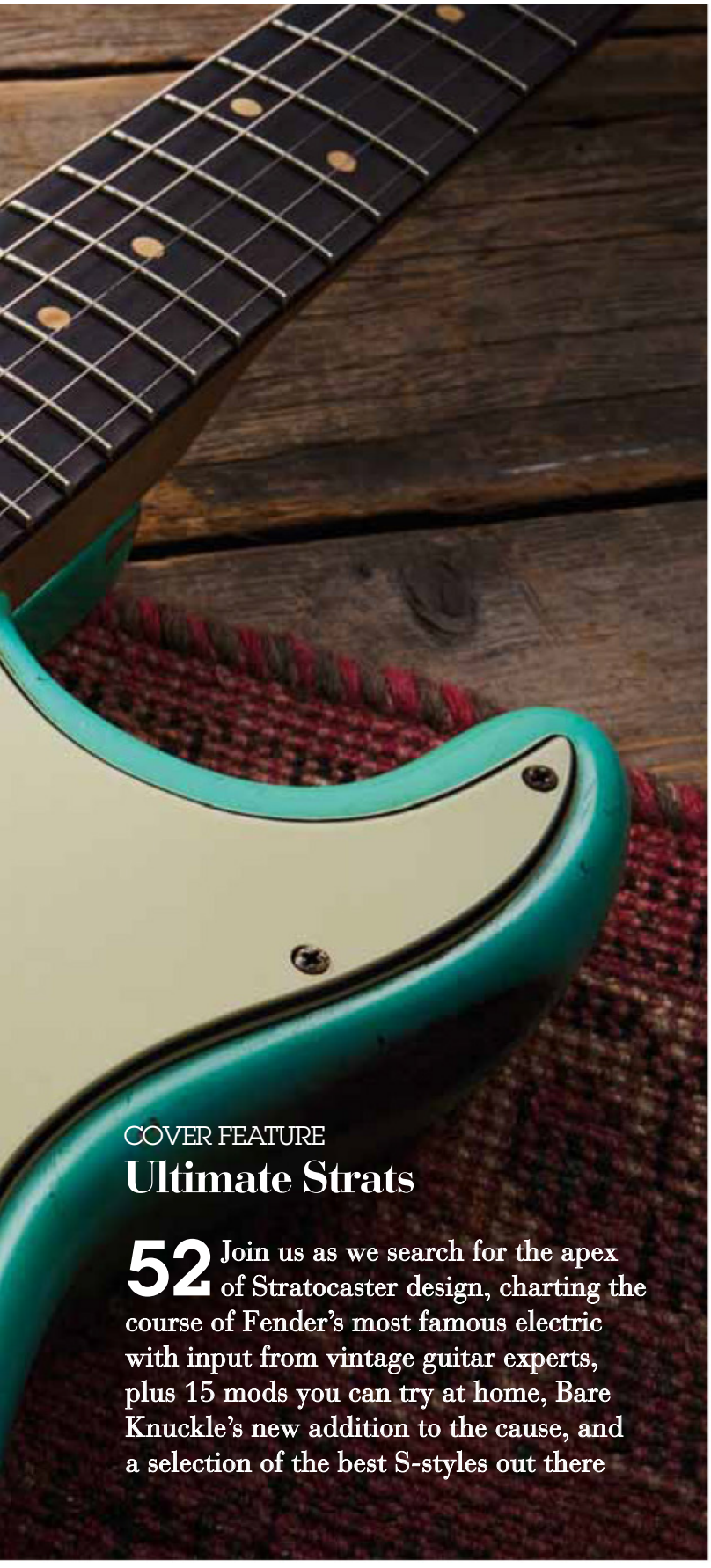

COVER FEATURE

Ultimate Strats

52 Join us as we search for the apex of Stratocaster design, charting the course of Fender's most famous electric with input from vintage guitar experts, plus 15 mods you can try at home, Bare Knuckle's new addition to the cause, and a selection of the best S-styles out there

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To enjoy all of the video and audio content in this issue, type the following link into your browser and follow the instructions in the post entitled 'Guitarist video and audio': **http://bit.ly/guitaristextra**

music radar SCAN TO GET OUR WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

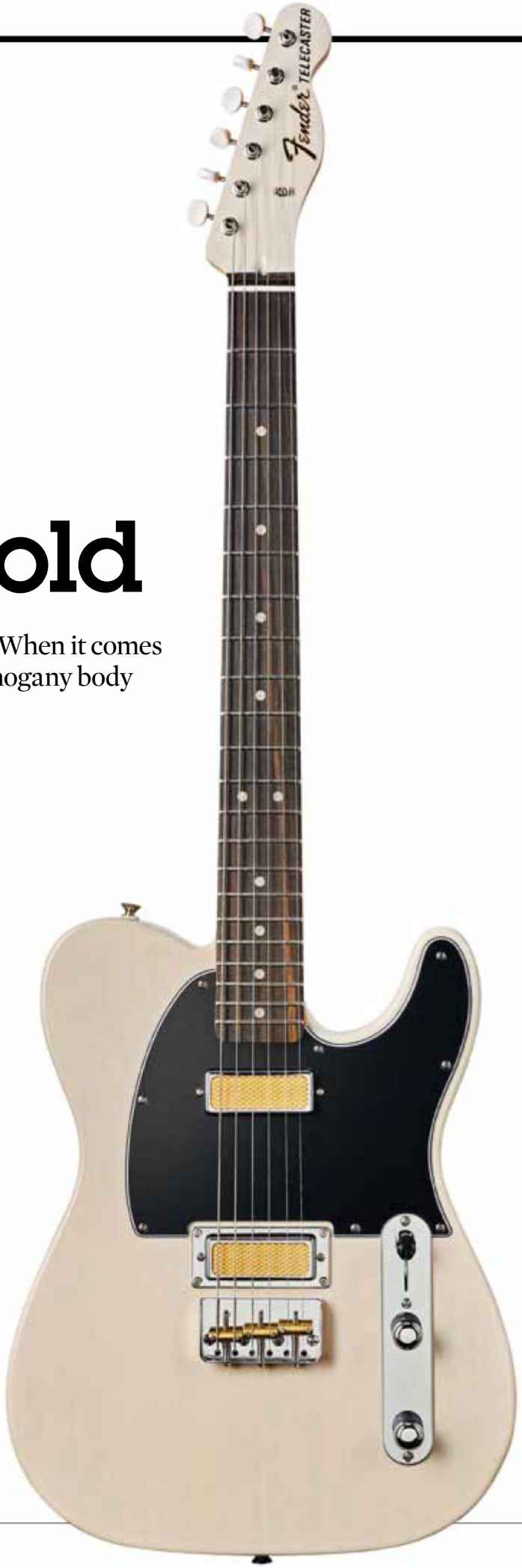
FENDER GOLD FOIL TELECASTER
£1,219

WHAT IS IT? 60s-aimed pawnshop prize with Gold Foil mini-humbuckers in Telecaster guise

Go For Gold

When is a Telecaster not a Telecaster? When it comes with a pair of mini-humbuckers, a mahogany body and ebony fingerboard like this one!

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Olly Curtis



Continuing a long run of pickup-pimped Telecasters, this 2023 release sees our favourite bolt-on in new dress and with a pair of Gold Foil pickups, which, says Fender, "combines the enduring charm of mid-century mail-order guitars with the style and playability of an authentic Fender".

Technically, there's no such thing as a single-recipe 'gold foil' pickup; the style is inspired by various pawnshop-prize brands such as Teisco, Guyatone, Harmony and Kay (as Huw Price discusses further on page 118). The pickup itself – anything with a bit of gold metallic 'foil' on the front with a partial metal cover – came in a variety of usually single-coil styles, some using rubberised 'fridge' magnets. But, hey, they're trendy and have been for some years with many pickup makers offering their own versions, from Jason Lollar's boutique style to Roswell's mass-market take. Fender tells us these are mini-humbuckers, not single coils, but that's about it.

Before we dig deeper into the pickups, this Mexican-made Telecaster is also unusual in that, firstly, it uses mahogany for its standard slab body, which appears

Just as important as those Gold Foil pickups is the quiet hum-cancellation that removes one of the age-old Tele problems

1. In both its finish options the headstock face matches the body finish. The tuners here are vintage style with split string posts and those 'budget-style' white plastic buttons

lightly striped through the slightly translucent White Blonde finish. We also get a Gibson-radius (305mm/12-inches) ebony fingerboard and some pretty big frets compared with vintage style. Then there's the cut-off Tele-style bridge, with its uncompensated brass saddles, that allows the bridge pickup to sit tidily in front in its own chromed pickup-mounting ring. The neck pickup is placed a little lower than normal towards the bridge and is suspended on the laminated black-faced scratchplate. It's the sort of mash-up that's a part of many boutique builders' catalogues, and although it's hardly an impulse buy at this asking price, it's significantly less expensive than those small-'shop builds.

Feel & Sounds

Despite our tongue-in-cheek introduction and this model's differences, our Gold Foil Tele is very much a Telecaster and feels like any other with a pretty standard weight of 3.61kg (7.94lb). There's nothing new to get used to here, either: for example, the chromed control plate is standard (not reversed) and there's no angled three-way switch or wiring tricks.

The neck has quite a deep tint to the satin finish on the back and is a perfectly good relaxed slim 'C', measuring 20.8mm deep at the 1st fret and 23mm by the 12th with a typical Fender 42.2mm width at the nut. The ebony fingerboard, with its light edge rolling, is almost jet black with some striping that shows off the well-installed and very well-polished medium jumbo frets (which measure approximately 2.6mm

2. The Gold Foil mini-humbucker sits a little lower than a normal Tele neck pickup. The lightly striped fingerboard with a 305mm (12-inch) radius is ebony, plus we get some well-polished bigger frets

3. The cut-off bridge is necessary so that the bridge pickup can sit tidily in front in its own mounting ring. The brass saddles are vintage style and uncompensated; it can be top-loaded, too

UNDER THE HOOD

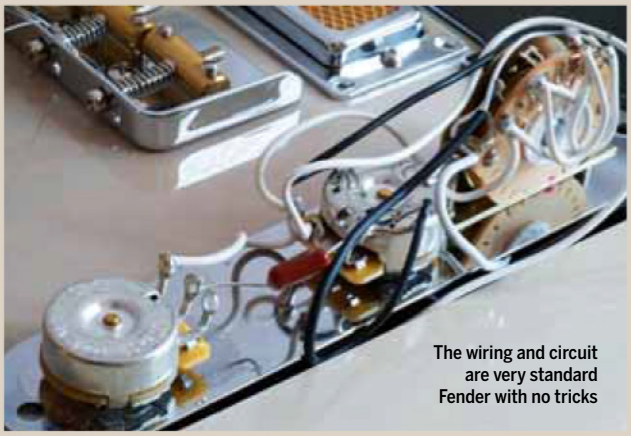
What's under all that chrome and gold?

In terms of its function, the circuit is Tele standard (at least since 1967) with its three-way lever switch voicing each pickup individually or both together. Really the only change here is the 500kohms pots for master volume and tone, instead of 250k; the tone cap is a standard 104k code 0.1µf.

"Fender Gold Foil mini-humbuckers deliver iconic visual flair and distinctive midrange bite and are inspired by the dazzling aesthetics of those cult-classic pickups treasured by blues, rock and indie musicians alike," we're told. They do bear an uncanny resemblance in specification, not to mention manufacturing style, which includes the same product code 'LGM' as Roswell's Alnico 5 Gold Foil Mini Humbuckers. Checking in with Fender we're told: "The Gold Foil Mini hums are indeed Alnico 5 bar magnets, the bridge is about 9k and the neck is about 8.6k. These specs look similar to the Roswell pickup, but these are not from Roswell," though Fender chooses not to mention the actual manufacturer.

Anyway, we can agree on the DCRs, which measure 8.69kohms at the bridge and 8.59k at the neck. There's no info on what's under the covers: are they like a Firebird's pickup with each coil wound around its own bar magnet, or do they use a ferrous alloy blade polepiece in each coil and a single bar magnet underneath?

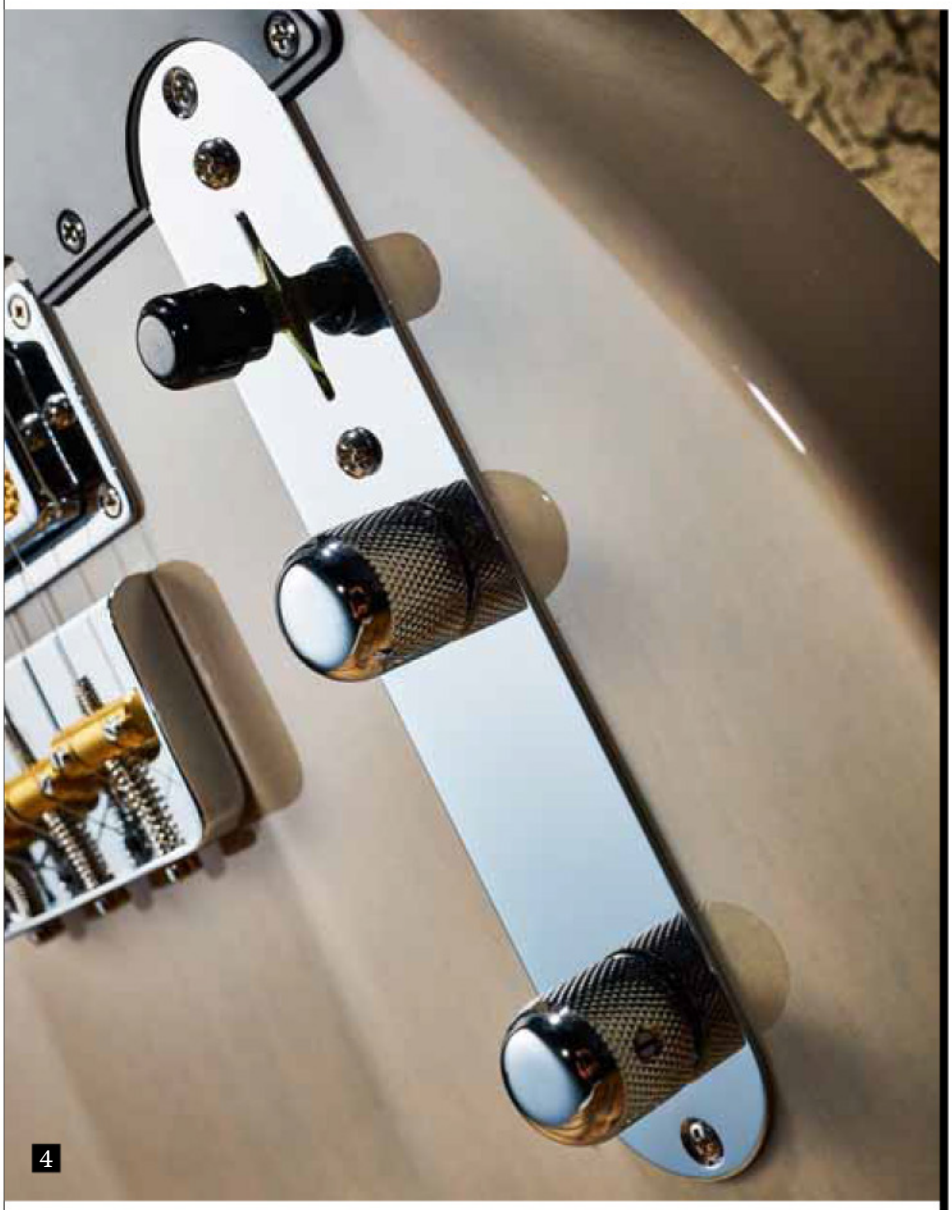
The base of the bridge Gold Foil shows off a very tidy construction


The wiring and circuit are very standard Fender with no tricks

wide with a height of 1.15mm). Compared with a big 50s neck with its small radius and small frets, this does feel quite different; it's more contemporary, a sort of Tele for a Gibson player.

If that were the aim then the neck pickup is where the money lies. It's full and clear sounding but with a clean humbucker flavour. It's rather contrasted by the bridge, which definitely sounds more 'Telecaster' and has plenty of (maybe a little too much) high-end bite that sounds a little sweeter with slight volume reduction and/or tone roll-off. The parallel mix is another strong sound, the depth of the neck contributing with the added sparkle of the bridge – there are some really useful rhythm sounds here. The pickups seem only lightly potted, which adds to the liveliness, especially with some grit and gain. And, being hum-cancelling, they're very quiet in terms of hum pick-up.

It's well set up, too. In fact, as supplied, the string heights were a little low for us, and slightly raising the saddles also helps to bury those slot-head adjustment screws. That said, although there's already a glass-paper shim in the neck pocket, you might want to increase the thickness of the shim to completely bury those sharp-edged adjustment screws; the outer two screws should really be slightly shorter in height.



4

4. Despite using different value pots, the control circuit is standard here with the usual three-way pickup selector, master volume and tone

The neck is more contemporary, a sort of Tele for a Gibson player… and the neck pickup is where the money lies

Verdict

While limited runs of the classics, not to mention a plethora of artist models, seem to be becoming the norm for both the giants of our industry and plenty of other large-scale makers, it means we're getting an increasing choice with our much-loved classic designs. So, another Tele flavour? Very much so, and just as important as those Gold Foil pickups is the quiet hum-cancellation that removes one of the age-old problems with the Tele. While you might need to tame the bite of the bridge pickup, both the neck and mix are especially strong, valid voices. Plus, of course, while this is not the only Tele available with humbuckers, it is the only current model with mini-humbuckers, so if you want to experiment with other aftermarket mini-humbuckers, or Firebird-style minis, what better platform? G

FENDER GOLD FOIL TELECASTER

PRICE: £1,219 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Single-cutaway, bolt-on electric
BODY: Mahogany
NECK: Maple, '60s 'C' profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/42.2mm
FINGERBOARD: Ebony, white pearloid dot inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 21, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Custom 'cut-off' Tele bridge with 3x brass saddles (strings-through-body or top-load), Vintage-style tuners with white buttons
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54mm
ELECTRICS: Gold Foil mini-humbuckers (neck and bridge), 3-position level pickup selector, master volume and tone
WEIGHT(kg/lb): 3.61/7.94
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: The mini Gold Foil range also includes the 3-pickup w/ Bigsby Jazzmaster (£1,439) and Jazz Bass (£1,299)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: White Blonde (as reviewed), Candy Apple Burst – gloss polyester body w/ matching headstock; satin urethane neck back

Fender Musical Instruments EMEA
01342 331700
www.fender.com

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Good detail to build; good weight and setup; hum-cancelling sounds produce a credible Tele with a different sonic flavour

CONS Those bridge saddles could easily be compensated; if the protruding bridge saddle adjustment screws bother you, then you'll need to shim the neck

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Harrier
EMPRIZE AMPLIFICATION

EMPRIZE HARRIER 1X12 COMBO
£1,649

WHAT IS IT? High-quality, UK-designed and built hand-wired combo inspired by 1950s Fender amps, with excellent reverb and tremolo effects

Top Drawer Tone

Emprize combines two coveted vintage Fender voices, authentically capturing brown-panel lead tones and black-panel rhythm sounds in one amp

Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Neil Godwin

The British boutique builder's market for guitars and amplification is in rude health, with many smaller operations becoming more visible as the pandemic abates. One of the better-known is Emprize, which is based in York. The company is headed up by founder Philip Fisher, who learned his craft, like many amp builders, by working on pedals and amplifiers for local bands, before taking the plunge and building his own designs. Emprize offers a wide range of small- to medium-sized combos and heads, most of which are inspired by classic Fenders from the 1950s yet with some unique twists, such as the one we're looking at here, the Emprize Harrier.

It's a compact 1x12 combo, housed in a 1960s Fender-style solid pine cabinet. Heavy-duty cream Tolex, a wheat speaker grille and cupcake control knobs add to the vintage vibe, giving the Harrier plenty of Fullerton mojo. The electronics are housed in a steel chassis that supports generous mains and output transformers, as well as a choke and a smaller coupling transformer for the amp's valve-powered spring reverb.

Speaking of valves, the Harrier has plenty of them, with three TAD 12AX7s and two 12AT7s in its preamp, driving a pair of TAD Red base 6V6 output valves and a GZ34 rectifier, for an output of around 20 watts. The loudspeaker fitted to our sample is the Eminence GA-SC64, designed in collaboration with legendary amp guru George Alessandro.

The Harrier's circuit layout takes its cues from Fender eyelet boards, but it uses turrets that are mounted on a solid G10/FR4 baseboard for vastly improved reliability and longevity. The valve bases are neatly hand-wired, along with all the front- and rear-panel components.

We get two footswitchable channels: a Lead channel that's based on Fender's short-lived but highly coveted brown-panel range from the late 1950s, and a Rhythm channel based on its later 60s black-panel designs. The Lead channel has two knobs for volume and tone, while the Rhythm channel has volume, treble and bass controls. Three more knobs control level for the valve-powered spring reverb, and speed and intensity for the optional bias modulated tremolo effect.

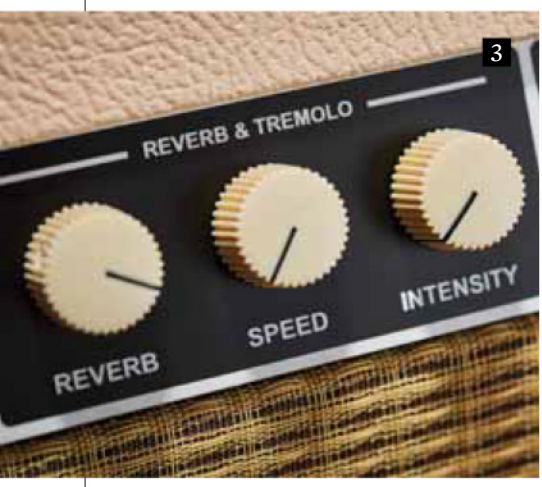
1. The Harrier has a footswitchable Lead channel with a separate tone control; it's modelled on Fender's late-50s brown-panel amps and sounds superb with a decent drive pedal

2. The superb Rhythm channel features volume, treble and bass controls. The non-tremolo version gains a midrange knob. Based on classic 60s Fender black-panel amps, it's one of the best clean channels we've heard in ages

3. Onboard, you get an old-school transformer coupled valve-powered spring reverb. As an option, you can also add bias-modulated tremolo, for the full-on vintage experience

1

While the Harrier's Fullerton influences are obvious, it has two distinctly different yet equally authentic voices and excellent onboard effects



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On the rear panel is an extension speaker jack and a three-way switch that varies the Harrier's negative feedback, with a choice of Normal, Low or None. There's a single power switch and a socket for the Harrier's supplied single-button footswitch, which toggles the two channels via a relay. The overall standard of construction is exceptional; the Harrier not only looks good but has been built to last a lifetime.

Feel & Sounds

First off, the Harrier purrs into action with practically zero hiss and hum, a good indicator of a well-sorted circuit and layout. There's no standby switch, though the 'soft start' of the valve rectifier means it isn't really needed. After a few seconds' wait for voltages to stabilise, we auditioned the Harrier's two channels with a variety of guitars, including a PAF-equipped Les Paul and a 90s American Standard Strat.

The brown panel-inspired Lead channel has a smooth, well-defined midrange, tight lows and strong highs, which can be tamed or emphasised by the wide-ranging tone control to quickly dial in humbuckers or single coils. Those highs ensure you'll always be heard, but the Harrier never sounds shrill or piercing. Pushing the volume control past the halfway mark reveals a delicious crunch that becomes increasingly compressed and vocal, even more so with the extra thrust of our Les Paul's PAFs.

The Rhythm channel has more headroom and a slightly scooped midrange, evoking

2

Fender's classic black-panel amps from the mid-60s. Non-tremolo Harriers gain a Midrange knob on this channel. However, the lack of one on our sample wasn't even noticed and the amp's clarity and detail brought out every nuance of our Strat with remarkable articulation, string separation and just a hint of edge. It's simply one of the best Fender-style clean sounds we've ever experienced.

The effects are equally well implemented here, with a wide range of speed and intensity from the tremolo to suit all tastes, while the reverb has plenty of depth without being too crashy – maybe not quite there for surf but ideal for everything else. We'd love to hear this amp with a full-on long pan reverb spring.

The three-position negative feedback switch progressively reduces speaker damping for a livelier response and an earlier break-up. Our preference was to

4

4. The Eminence GA-SC64 is designed in collaboration with amp guru George Alessandro, and there's a list of alternative speaker options including most of the more popular choices

5. Negative feedback is usually a fixed value in most amps, but on the Harrier there's a choice of three settings: Normal, Low and Off. Lower or no negative feedback reduces speaker damping and gives the amp a livelier feel, with a less abrupt transition into output stage clipping

5

leave it in the Normal position, but it's nice to have a choice available for those occasions when a more vintage feel is needed. There's plenty of power from the Harrier's loudspeaker, possibly too much to hear the non-master volume overdrive in some smaller venues, although teaming it with a good drive pedal easily overcomes this. The Harrier works really well with all kinds of effects – in particular, the Rhythm channel's sparkling clarity makes it an ideal platform for pedalboard users.

Verdict

While the Harrier's Fullerton influences are obvious, it's far from being just another clone, with two distinctly different yet equally authentic voices and excellent onboard effects. The sounds from both channels are superb: the Lead channel is great fun to play, especially when teamed with a decent overdrive pedal, while the gorgeous black-panel rhythm voice is among the best we've heard. It may be made in here York, but the Harrier captures that elusive Americana feel, adding atmosphere and authenticity to any US-influenced genre. The excellent Eminence Alessandro speaker is an ideal match for these sounds, too, with plenty of volume on tap, but if it's not for you then Emprize has a list of alternatives to choose from.

We'd like to see the tremolo effect footswitchable as well as the channels, ideally with indicator LEDs on the pedal and front panel. But when an amp sounds as good as the Harrier, minor quibbles are easy to forgive. Aimed clearly at professionals and well-heeled amateurs, Emprize's Harrier is a 20 with plenty that compares very favourably when set against competition from the USA. If you're after proper vintage American tone, it's definitely worth checking out. G

EMPRIZE HARRIER 1X12 COMBO

PRICE: £1,649
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: All valve preamp/power amp with valve reverb/tremolo
VALVES: 3x 12AX7, 2x 12AT7, 2x 6V6, 1x GZ34 rectifier
OUTPUT: 20W RMS
DIMENSIONS: 528 (w) x 241 (d) x 459mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 15/33.6
CABINET: Finger-jointed solid pine
LOUDSPEAKERS: 1x 12" Eminence Alessandro GA-SC64
CHANNELS: 2, footswitchable
CONTROLS: Lead volume, lead tone. Lead/Rhythm channel switch, Rhythm volume, treble, bass. Reverb level, tremolo speed, tremolo intensity
FOOTSWITCH: Single-button footswitch (supplied) toggles channels
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: External speaker jack, 3-position negative feedback switch gives a choice of standard, low or no feedback
OPTIONS: The tremolo circuit fitted to our amp is an optional extra; wide choice of cabinet covering and speaker options, contact manufacturer for more details
RANGE OPTIONS: Non-tremolo version (adds a Rhythm channel Mid control) costs £1,599

Emprize Amplification
www.emprizeamps.com

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Highly authentic USA tones; great brown-panel crunch/Lead channel; stunning black-panel-inspired Rhythm channel; excellent string separation and single-note articulation; compact; easy one-handed lift

CONS It would be nice to have footswitchable tremolo and LED indicators on the switch and front panel; reverb lacks a little in delay length

VOX MV50-BM BRIAN MAY LIMITED EDITION SET
£419

WHAT IS IT? Nutube-powered compact signature amp, designed alongside the Queen guitarist with a built-in KAT treble booster

1

2

Royal Flash

A highly anticipated signature version of Vox's unique Nutube micro head, approved by Brian May himself

Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Phil Barker

1. The MV50-BM's finish pays tribute to the other part of the Queen guitarist's unique tone with an eye-catching 'Red Special' paint job that blends really well with the diamond control panel and speaker grille

2. The matching BC108 speaker cabinet includes a specially-designed eight-inch Vox driver that's been tailored to get the best from the MV50 head. The cabinet design maximises low-end response for a sound that's out of all proportion to its size

3 The MV50s all use a Korg 6P1 Nutube in their preamp for real valve overdrive and dynamics. The 6P1 is a clever twist on vacuum fluorescent display tech, designed specifically for audio. It behaves like a valve because it is a valve

4 The integrated Knight Audio Technologies treble booster is what gives this particular MV50 its 'secret sauce', adding extra gain and upper harmonics for the definitive Brian May tone

If you're talking signature guitar tones, we'd wager there's none more instantly recognisable than that of Brian May. Ever since Queen's debut album five decades ago, a whole industry has grown up around 'that sound', with guitars, amps and effects all vying for the attention of hordes of Queen enthusiasts who want to replicate it.

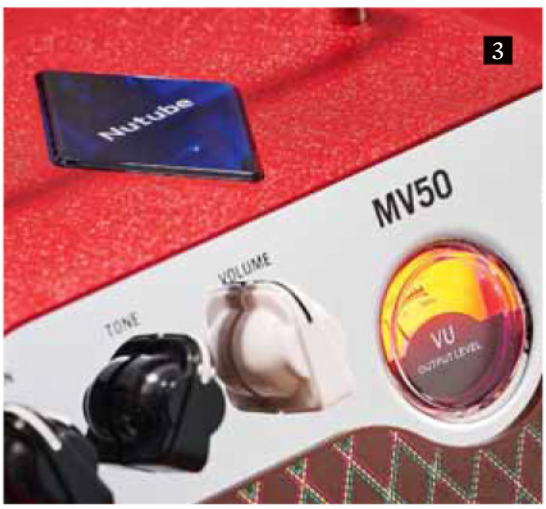
Aside from the 'Red Special', May's unique homemade guitar, the other main component is, of course, the Vox AC30, which May plugs into via a variety of treble boosters. Now there's a special Brian May signature version of Vox's highly portable MV50 micro head, which includes a built-in treble booster circuit by Knight Audio Technologies, one of the most well-known Queen equipment specialists, with Sir Brian himself among its customers.

Introduced back in 2017, Vox's typically innovative MV50 was one of the first guitar amps to capitalise on the small size and weight of Class D amplification, combined with a clever valve substitute called the Nutube 6P1. Developed by Vox's parent company Korg, the Nutube is a twin triode using vacuum fluorescent display tech to amplify audio just like a regular 12AX7 but in a more compact and less power-hungry package. The result is highly authentic valve-like tone with enough power for any gig, from a head that's no larger than many stompboxes.

The MV50-BM edition has been designed in collaboration with May himself and features an eye-catching 'Red Special' paint job that's been carried over to the matching BC108 speaker cabinet, available as a Limited Edition Set, with other Brian May goodies to sweeten the deal.

The MV50-BM sounds very similar to the regular AC version until you kick the integrated KAT treble booster into action. We've said before that the standard MV50 AC model does an uncanny job of replicating a full-size AC30 but doesn't quite get the heavier compressed Brian May tones. The KAT treble boost is the missing link that makes this possible, and with everything on 10, it's pretty much instant Queen at Wembley and nearly as loud, besides looking the part, too.

You can buy the MV50-BM signature head on its own, but we think the smart money will be heading for this Limited Edition Set, which includes the matching BC108 cab, plus postcards and a keychain. Most importantly, though, if your daily practice routine starts with *We Will Rock You*, this is the sound.



VOX MV50-BM BRIAN MAY LIMITED EDITION SET

PRICE: £419
ORIGIN: Vietnam
TYPE: Hybrid valve/solid-state preamp, Class D power amp
OUTPUT: 50W RMS into 4ohms or 25W RMS into 8ohms
DIMENSIONS: 135mm (w) x 100mm (d) x 75mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 0.5/1
CABINET: Steel
CHANNELS: 1
CONTROLS: Gain, tone, master volume. Treble boost on/off, standby on/off, eco mode on/off, output impedance switch and flat/deep EQ switch
FOOTSWITCH: None
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Built-in Knight Audio Technologies treble booster, speaker-emulated phones/line out
OPTIONS: Available as a head on its own for £259, or as part of a Limited Edition Set with matching BC108 cab
RANGE OPTIONS: The MV50 range currently includes Rock, AC, Clean and Boutique models priced at £179, plus a High Gain head that's £119

Korg UK
01908 304664
www.voxamps.com

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS A version of the MV50 that nails the classic Queen sounds; super compact and portable; jaw-dropping volume and tone

CONS Can get a bit noisy at higher gain settings with treble booster engaged (characteristic of circuit); external laptop-style power supply must be handled with care

ELECTRO-HARMONIX LIZARD QUEEN
£99

WHAT IS IT? An octave fuzz pedal based on an imagined 1974 Electro-Harmonix design

Animal Instinct

The pedal that Electro-Harmonix could have made in the 1970s (but didn't) is now here with some help from JHS Pedals

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Olly Curtis

1. Shade or Sun? It's your choice, as are all points in between on the Balance knob – the sound changes from a smooth vibe to a more raspy and spluttery experience

2. Fully anti-clockwise on the Octave control, there is no octave, but turning the knob builds in the effect to exactly the point you need it

3. Graphic designer Daniel Danger created this look as a homage to the EHX design heyday of the 1970s using Letraset fonts, just like the original pedals did

For those of us playing guitar in the 1970s, the Electro-Harmonix range looked unique and quite exotic with those huge metallic enclosures, quirky graphics and, best of all, those names – Electric Mistress, Big Muff Pi, Screaming Tree, Bad Stone and so on. Bringing things up to date, in 2022 pedal nerd Josh Scott of JHS Pedals took on the task of creating a homage to that era: an Electro-Harmonix pedal that never existed but could have. EHX never actually made an octave fuzz, so Josh took up the challenge, dived in and came up with the Lizard Queen, with Daniel Danger providing the artwork. The next stage was EHX head honcho, Mike Matthews, getting involved and the pedal went into production. A limited-edition JHS-built big box 70s-style pedal has sold out, so it's this nano series pedal from EHX that you'll find in the shops.

This is a fixed-gain fuzz with no gain knob, just a volume control for setting the output level, which seems to be at unity at around 11 o'clock leaving plenty of leeway to build in a boost. You get a fine vintage fuzz sound with a bright tonality, and the gain amount seems to have been chosen just right for everyday playing tasks. Variations in its character come via a Balance knob that runs from Shadow to Sun and has more than just EQ going on. The fuzz is at its smoothest at the Shadow end and has decent clean-up characteristics, but advance the knob and you get a tonal change and a spittier sound that becomes really apparent if you roll back your guitar volume for some gated glitchiness.

The Octave is added to the signal chain by its own dedicated knob, which means you can go from none, to just a tickle, and all the way to a point where it really sings through. There are some great sounds wherever you are on the dial with plenty of interaction between the knobs to explore. The effect of the balance knob is especially apparent with the octave turned up high, and raucousness abounds towards the Sun end.

Verdict

It may be the pedal that never was, but we're glad it's here now. The Lizard Queen is a fine example of octave fuzz, with the adjustable octave giving you a real flexibility in dialling in your chosen sound. G

ELECTRO-HARMONIX LIZARD QUEEN

PRICE: £99
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Octave fuzz pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Volume, Octave, Balance, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V battery or 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 5mA
DIMENSIONS: 66 (w) x 111 (d) x 50mm (h)

Electro-Harmonix
www.ehx.com

8/10

PROS Compact size; solidly usable fuzz sound; adjustable octave; cool vintage graphics

CONS Some may prefer smoother clean-up characteristics

THE RIVALS

There are plenty of octave fuzz pedals out there – some with a fixed octave, some that can switch or dial the octave in. Similar to the Lizard Queen, the Pigtronix Octava (£109) has a Blend knob to mix in the octave-up effect, but other pedals have a toggle-switched octave, such as the vintage Foxx Tone Machine had. Its designer Steve Ridinger more recently revived the circuit as the Danelectro 3699 Fuzz (£175), endowing it with separately footswitchable octave, plus an added Mid Boost switch. The Wampler Fuzztration (£199) also has a separate footswitch for the octave effect, plus the choice of placing it before or after the fuzz.

Wampler's Fuzztration pedal offers in-your-face fuzz

ORIGIN EFFECTS DCX BOOST
£259

WHAT IS IT? Boost and overdrive pedal inspired by a UA 610 recording preamp

Preamp Glory

This classy tone-shaping boost and drive from Origin Effects is based on a vintage valve-powered preamp

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Olly Curtis

1. The Voice switch offers two different amounts of treble roll-off if you want something different from the flat EQ in the central switch position
2. Use the Mode switch to choose between EQ or OD – OD mode adds an extra 14dB of gain for driven sounds
3. The low-frequency (L.F.) and high-frequency (H.F.) knobs have been very particularly voiced for electric guitar – you can't dial in a bad sound

Origin Effects has history with pedals that are based on classic studio equipment, with its Cali76 offering Urei 1176-style compression and the M-EQ Driver featuring Pultec-style EQ. Now we have the DCX Boost, inspired by the Universal Audio 610 recording preamp – DCX being the Roman numerals for 610. Described as a tone-shaper and drive pedal, the DCX Boost reimagines the 610 circuitry, optimising it for electric guitar and aiming to deliver the sort of sonic enhancement that the vintage circuitry would add with either a completely flat frequency response or some tonal tweaking.

The pedal has two modes: EQ and the gainer OD. EQ is the go-to mode if you'd like some clean boost, although at higher settings of the Drive knob it is capable of drive that's perfect for adding a bit of grit to clean sounds and covering 'edge of break-up' and beyond. This is one of those pedals that simply improves your tone just by being active – even at a flat setting and unity gain it brings something more.

There are plenty of tonal options to set things perfectly to your guitar and amp combination: a Voice switch offers two levels of top-end roll-off, and in EQ mode Origin has incorporated its Adaptive Circuitry, which keeps clean sounds bright and sparkly, reining back the treble with increasing drive. Low- and high frequency tone knobs seem to have been voiced perfectly for electric guitar, contributing a positive tonal effect, even at the extremes of their travel.

Switch to OD mode and you'll find some excellent drive tones. There's no Adaptive Circuitry here, but there is a tighter low-end and a natural treble to suit drive sounds, plus extra attenuation via the Voice switch. There are some fine tones to be had with the Voice switch engaged to roll off treble but with the High knob sweetening the top that's there. Towards the extremes of the Drive knob things get fuzz-like or, perhaps more accurately, like a console preamp being overdriven – something that's been regularly used in music production over the years with a guitar plugged straight in.

Verdict

The DCX from Origin Effects is a really versatile boost and drive with tightly focused EQ options. If we were restricted to just having one pedal in front of an amp, this is the one we'd choose. G

ORIGIN EFFECTS DCX BOOST

PRICE: £259
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Tone shaper and drive pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass
CONTROLS: Level, Drive, L.F., H.F., Mode switch (EQ/OD), Voice Switch (Dark/Medium/Flat), Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 90mA
DIMENSIONS: 58 (w) x 124 (d) x 64mm (h)

Origin Effects
www.origineffects.com

Guitarist GOLD

10/10

PROS Origin's usual high standard of build quality; compact size; great response to playing dynamics; variety of sounds

CONS Absolutely nothing

THE RIVALS

A favoured choice of many players looking for boost with some EQ is the Xotic RC Booster V2 (£179), which has a two-band EQ with 15dB of cut or boost and a second independently footswitchable gain channel. The DCX Boost is not the only pedal based on a studio preamp – the JHS Colour Box V2 (£429), based on a channel from a Neve console, is described as a studio-grade preamplifier, EQ and distortion generator with multi-instrument compatibility, with phantom power for mics. If you're a bass player, Origin Effects also has a bass version: the DCX Bass (£259).

JHS Pedals' Colour Box V2 updates its initial version with additional EQ controls and more

IMAGE COURTESY OF ANDERTONS.CO.UK

theWishlist

Dream gear to beg, borrow and steal for...

Fender Mod Shop Telecaster £2,179

CONTACT **Fender Musical Instruments EMEA** PHONE **0333 200 8765** WEB **www.fender.com** WORDS **Neville Marten** PHOTOGRAPHY **Olly Curtis**

"Regular readers will know we don't usually write reviews in the first person. But given this was my own selection of model, colour, features and so on, for the Fender Mod Shop competition we ran in issue 493, I was never going to be dispassionate about it. I've therefore been given special dispensation this time.

"Fender's Mod Shop allows players to make online selections from a menu of options, including model (Strat, Tele, Jazzmaster, Jaguar), timbers, colour, pickups and hardware, plus neck shape and material. Fender then builds the guitar specially for you. It's a sort of scaled-down Custom Shop, if you like, and a whole lot more affordable. And I couldn't be more pleased.

"The backstory is that Jamie Dickson set himself, David Mead and me the challenge of creating our own Mod Shop guitar, which would be offered to *Guitarist* readers to pick a favourite. As it happened, mine won on the day, and lucky reader Rob has already received his prize. Thankfully, he's as over-the-moon with it as I am.

"The basic premise is to select your basic core model, then choose from the list of options presented at www.fender.com. It's not super comprehensive, but in truth that's no bad thing, as any more than there is and I'd never have been able to narrow it down.

"Anyway, the reasoning behind my choices was to go for something I'd never usually dream of buying. Hence this instrument's stunning Burgundy Mist metallic over an alder body, that righteous-looking Fender Bigsby modification, solid Indian rosewood neck with 22 medium-jumbo frets, with a Tim Shaw-designed Yosemite humbucker at the neck. The final piece of bling is the white pearl pickguard, surely the only choice on Burgundy Mist metallic?

"Now, even with all one's preferences ticked, any guitar has to work as a cohesive whole. So I'm pleased (and relieved) to announce that Fender has done a cracking job. First of all, it looks stunning. Everyone that's seen it has said so. The D-to-C profile neck sits beautifully in the hand, and the power balance between neck humbucker and bridge single coil is not the issue one often imagines it will be. The Bigsby stays in tune providing you treat it with the respect it deserves, and overall it's a guitar that pleases me greatly.

"New owner Rob thinks the same. 'This Tele now ends my collection as I can't justify or find room for more," he told us. 'Thank you, *Guitarist*, for the joy you've given me, and for Nev's wonderful design that now belongs to this old fellow to enjoy.' Perfect!"

1. The Indian rosewood neck's thin-skin, open-pore finish looks and feels fantastic. Nev went for classic Fender-style tuners, not the chunkier Schaller-style option. Note the ultra-classy laser-etched Fender logo
2. Each custom-order guitar comes with this hefty neckplate showing your own personal serial number, the guitar's Corona, California origin, and the fact that it comes from the Mod Shop
3. Heath Robinson himself would have been proud of how Fender overcame the problem of how to get a Bigsby onto a Telecaster. The six-saddle bridge is the Jazzmaster style, the pickup sits in a shiny chrome base, and the short Bigsby has the fabled Fender backwards 'F' moulded into it. Fab!

4. Before Fender reintroduced its full custom colour range, Burgundy Mist was one of the rarest to be found on vintage instruments. Luckily, we can now add it to our Mod Shop list of options, and doesn't it look great alongside all that chrome and the blingy white pearl Tele pickguard?

5. The Tim Shaw-designed Yosemite humbucker at the neck not only balances visually with the Tele's Bigsby and other chrome hardware, it does so sonically, too, giving the guitar a different voice to that which we expect

6. It has to be said that our Mod Shop Tele makes for a pretty impressive sight. The solid rosewood neck works brilliantly against the lighter-coloured body finish and pickguard, while the veritable expanse of chrome really is redolent of the Chevys and Caddies that cruised LA's freeways during the mid-60s. We trust winner Rob will have many years of pleasure with his new guitar

THE LINEUP

Gas Supply

Our pick of the month's most delectable and wallet-bothering new gear

HANDMADE IN THE UK
As with all PJD guitars, the York Standard is made in the UK at the company's HQ, making this an attractive proposition for those wanting custom attention to detail at relatively reasonable prices

T-STYLE STYLING
The High Tea pickups are designed and made by PJD and, along with the three-saddle bridge and control plate, see the York paying homage to everyone's favourite slab-bodied rocker

SHAPE
It's not all Tele-type, though. We'd say that body shape mashes up various outlines to produce something altogether quite different

PJD York Standard £2,199

CONTACT **PJD Guitars** PHONE **07791 236 353** WEB **www.pjdguitars.com**

That's snazzy! A bit like if my MusicMan made friends with a Telecaster.

This is the York Standard from PJD Guitars and, yes, while it is the UK builder's take on a T-style guitar, as you can see this is more than just another T-copy, offering something a little different.

Like what?

Well, the shape for a start. Cut it in half horizontally and you've got the pointy horn that owes more to the cutaway on a Les Paul than a Tele, and on the bass side it's much more pronounced, taking it even further from the traditional T-shape. PJD has also steered clear of traditional Tele woods, opting for obeche here (and across its newly revised versions of previous models, too).

What's obeche?

A hardwood that lives on the lighter, softer side of the hardwood family. This makes it a great choice for working with on guitars, the end result being a drop in weight without the need for chambering or weight relief. Here, we've got a completely solid body, but unlike its original inspiration there's also some comfort contouring, too.

Right on. Tell us about the neck...

The neck is quarter-sawn maple with a one-size-fits-all C-shape profile and it's finished in a natural satin nitro. As you'd probably expect, it's fitted with a maple fretboard, which is home to 22 Jescar nickel frets and inlaid with some neat, contemporary-looking hollow black rectangles. Flip it over and you'll see the brilliantly ergonomic heel joint with four recessed screws and some sleek comfort-enhancing curves, should you dare to venture t'ward the difficult notes.

What about the pickups?

Along with the bridge and control plate, these are York Standard's most telling T-style appointments. Both pickups are PJD's own designs, named High Tea. That might conjure images of cucumber sandwiches, but tonally these are designed to be more Glasto than garden party. They're hand-wound by PJD and wired to a traditional volume/tone/three-way paddle control layout.

You mentioned the bridge – what is it?

PJD has always made Gotoh its go-to, and there's no change there. We have a more old-school design here

JARGON CRUNCHING

Open-Pore Finish
PJD uses an open-pore (or open-grain) finish method that leaves larger-pored wood unfilled. Not only can this allow the visuals of a guitar body's grain to pop through whatever finish is applied, but it also reduces stages of filling and sanding, thus keeping the cost of a custom-made guitar lower.

FINISHES
There are seven finish options, all applied over the open-grain obeche body, and each one is nitrocellulose

with three brass saddles from Gotoh's In-Tune line. It's a similar story at the other end with six In-Tune tuners taking care of the tension.

Does it come in any other finishes?

It does. First, though, we should give a shout to the beautiful Ocean Jade Metallic you can see pictured. It's vintage enough to be familiar but modern enough to look fresh. As with all the York Standard models, the wood is left with an open grain. The finishes are nitrocellulose and there's a choice of seven colours (Ocean Jade Metallic, TV Yellow, Firemist Gold, Candy Apple Red, Midnight Black, Aspen White and Three Colour Sunburst).

Shame there's no Bigsby option...

Funny you should mention that! PJD also offers the York Plus, which, for an additional £129, will allow you to get your wobble on courtesy of a Bigsby vibrato.

What's the damage, then?

The York Standard is £2,199 and includes a gigbag. Check back next month when we'll be putting this one through its paces in a full review. **[SW]**

ALSO OUT NOW...

EMG JMASTER SYSTEM FROM £343

Nope, it's not a SEGA. The first name in active pickups has turned its hand to a set of fully compatible, hum-free Jazzmaster pickups as part of its Retro Active line. These Alnico V-fuelled single coils from EMG are available as a pickguard-mounted set (from £343), which makes use of your Jazzmaster's control layout with the brand's SPC control packing a mid-boost and the EXG control looking after bass/treble boost. Meanwhile, the JM's 'Strangle' switch can be used to engage a full-spectrum 12dB clean boost. If you just want the pickups, the EMG JMaster Set (from £200) is available in Black, Ivory or White, and, as always, uses EMG's solderless installation system.
www.emgpickups.com

POWERS ELECTRIC A-TYPE FROM $3,700

You know Andy Powers as the CEO of Taylor Guitars, but now the revered luthier who brought us Taylor's revolutionary V-Class bracing system has unveiled a new electric guitar design, and it's not a Taylor. The Powers Electric A-Type is an enclosed hollowbody design with an asymmetrical outline. Inside, the body is trussed with two soundposts that Powers says will maximise resonance and suppress feedback, and work with the unnamed Powers-designed pickups to provide "warmth and clarity/brightness and bite" respectively. The 'camshaft' vibrato has also been custom-designed by Powers, whose objective for the instrument was to "reimagine a guitar that doesn't sound or play like something you already know". No news just yet on when these will be coming to the UK, but if Powers' pedigree is anything to go by, we're in for something special.
www.powerselectricguitars.com

THE LINEUP

Fretbuzz

A monthly look at must-hear artists from all corners of the guitar world, from the roots of their sound to the tracks that matter most

Artist: Carl Baldassarre

Album: Grand Boulevard (Carl Baldassarre Music)

Carl Baldassarre describes his debut solo album as "like going down an old street with different style houses along it, each with their own story and all aligned on this grand boulevard called life" **carlbaldassarremusic.com**

"I was raised with an electric guitar in one hand and a composer's quill in the other," says Carl, who fuses his love of classical and rock music into a progressive style

Cleveland, Ohio's Carl Baldassarre has been practising music for over 50 years and is a renowned guitarist and composer. His YouTube channel dubs him the "Professor of Classic Rock" and focuses on guitar riffs and techniques, while his debut solo album, *Grand Boulevard*, sees him lead a rich and diverse set of rock, funk, R&B and pop numbers, not to mention his tribute work with Baldassarre's Led Zeppelin Revival. This is a busy musician. "I've never really thought about why I'm prolific," he says. "But it has to do with curiosity and the thrill of trying new things. Nothing is more exciting than the next thing you're working on – and I'm addicted to that feeling."

Creative Progression

This abounding creativity comes across on *Grand Boulevard*, a sprawling album full of ingenuity. "It was written one song at a time, so there wasn't a grand plan," Carl explains. "Each piece is an exploration of genre and sentiment. They're all true stories and I wanted to capture a genre to express the sentiment of a message and then move onto the next one. I didn't want to do it as a concept or stick to a genre, so by the end I thought it was quite a journey. It's sort of autobiographical, so it's loosely held together. It's like going down an old street with different style houses along it, each with their own story and all aligned on this grand boulevard called life."

A Musical Calling

Carl's life has always been informed by music. "I started knocking about at 17 and by 19 I had a record deal and then toured for four years," he tells us. "I was raised with an electric guitar in one hand and a composer's quill in the other. I've always loved the romantic air of classical music, but I also grew up in the 60s and 70s so it was impossible to escape rock guitar. That's why I spend my time doing progressive rock because it gives you a chance to compose and fuse classical with rock music. It's why I liked the band Gentle Giant growing up – they were like an electronic chamber orchestra."

Electric Feel

With such a love for classical music and composition, we wonder why guitar became the main focus. "The first guitar I played was an acoustic and the first chord somebody showed me was an A minor. I was gobsmacked by the sound," he says. "There's something about that timbre and sonority that resonates with whatever wavelength I'm on, be it electric or acoustic. But the thing about the electric guitar is you have an amplifier, so you don't have to overplay the instrument. In fact, it sounds more powerful if you don't. The chords are purer because you're not overstroking the strings, and if you look at the great players you'll see that they often have very feathery approaches and let the amp do the work."

PHOTO BY EAFOTO ERICK ANDERSON

The Power Of Choice

"After starting the YouTube channel and focusing a lot on Jimmy Page, I broke out my Les Paul," Carl says. "I've been playing that pretty steadily for the live [Led Zeppelin Revival] shows, but at any given time you'll see me with different guitars. I have a Brian Moore, which works really well for progressive rock... But then, whenever I pick up my Strat, I think I could run away for the rest of my life and play that guitar. There's something about its humanity; it does something that no other guitar can do in terms of allowing you to get closer to your true voice." **[GK]**

Standout track: *Sands Of Tarifa*
For fans of: Led Zeppelin, AC/DC, Joe Bonamassa, Guns N' Roses

ON THE SAME PAGE

Carl found the ultimate inspiration in Zep's guitarist

When it comes to Carl's influences, Jimmy Page stands out – with Carl studying him, writing about him and forming a Led Zeppelin revival show. "It was a case of the right person and right sound at that time in my life," he says. "I had an older sister who once sat me down with a stack of vinyl and said, 'Listen to this,' and it was Heartbreaker from *Led Zeppelin II*. I just could not believe that solo in the middle! I didn't know what I was hearing. Everything just came together at the moment and I was addicted to that unbridled explosive passion."

PHOTO BY EAFOTO ERICK ANDERSON

THE LINEUP

Albums

The month's best guitar music – a hand-picked selection of the finest fretwork on wax

PHOTO BY ALEX SOLCA

Steve Lukather evokes Toto-level expression on his ninth solo album

Steve Lukather
Bridges

The Players Club (available now) **9/10**

Toto's guitar legend releases epic solo album – with a little help from his friends

Steve Lukather of Toto and countless sessions fame – including, famously, *Thriller* by Michael Jackson – has a new album of eight songs, spanning rock riffers through to 'adult chord' blues journeys. The flavour throughout reminds us of Toto's heyday and Steve agrees. "It's not a Toto record," he told us, "but it's not unlike one. David [Paich], Joe [Williams] and myself, we all play on each other's stuff. You know, we all love each other."

You may have already heard the first single, *When I See You Again*, which gained huge viewing numbers on its first day on YouTube, and there has been an equally healthy response to subsequent single releases, too. *When I See You Again* features a big production and an up-tempo, straight-ahead groove in the mould of classic Toto hit songwriting, complete with Lydian changes, tight rock-guitar rhythms, an emotive solo and warm backing vocals from bandmate Joseph Williams.

Luke knows blues as well as rock; the classy *Take My Love* shows a tasty swing rhythm, expressive vocals and a blend of arresting neck and bridge pickup guitar parts. It has a wonderful solo, too, with searing vibrato and flashy runs. The boogie-blues vibe of *Burning Bridges* is killer, greatly enhanced by Steely Dan styled chord changes, while closer, *I'll Never Know*, evokes a Toto/Pink Floyd marriage with space between instruments, echo effects, bluesy lead lines and keyboard-style guitar staccato rhythms. Overall, this is a hugely reflective album that shows the guitar legend in full and expressive form. **[JS]**

Standout track: *Burning Bridges*
For fans of: Toto, Steve Morse, Robben Ford

Connor Selby
Connor Selby

Provogue Records (available now) **8/10**

Powerful debut from fiery blues-rocker

If this debut is anything to go by, UK blues/soul guitarist Connor looks to have a great career ahead. His voice is appealing with phrasing attributes that evoke various greats. Opener, *I Can't Let You Go*, is deep into a Memphis soul/blues vibe with tight horns, a vibrato rhythm section and a solo that sings, à la BB King and Paul Kossoff. *Falling In Love Again* has a killer dual clean guitar opener, channelling Leo Nocentelli and Cornell Dupree-style grooving and a super-smooth backbeat. The band winds down to a slow chill behind Connor's dynamic vocals in *The Man I Ought To Be* – a wonderful arrangement and excellent humbucker solo, too. Finally, closer, *Starting Again*, features piano/organ/acoustic guitar prominence and a lovely outro solo. **[JS]**

Standout track: *I Can't Let You Go*
For fans of: BB King, Paul Kossoff

Shakti
This Moment

Abstract Logix (available now) **9/10**

East meets West in a jubilant world music fusion

It's been 50 years since John McLaughlin formed Shakti – a unique fusion of jazz and Indian music. There have been live releases in the intervening years, but here the band have reformed to deliver their first studio album since 1976. "Shakti is very much a live band," McLaughlin notes. "A part of the problem with making a studio recording has been the fact that we live on different continents..." Thankfully, modern recording techniques and the internet came to the rescue, the result being a collaborative effort that spans the world.

On *This Moment* McLaughlin is joined by Zakir Hussain (tabla), Shankar Mahadevan (vocals), Ganesh Rajagopalan (violin) and Selvaganesh Vinayakram (percussion). Right from the opening track, *Shrini's Dream*, the band display their wares in the form of percussive unison riffs, McLaughlin's guitar moving between lightly chorused rhythm to speedy single lines throughout. The album is a remarkable feat, atmospheric and compelling in equal measure. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Bending The Rules*
For fans of: Mahavishnu Orchestra, Ravi Shankar

Maebe's Michael Astley-Brown releases his second album

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS

Maebe

Rebirth. Relive. Repeat.

Maebe (available now)

8/10

Bristol-based collective produces strong second album

The second album from Maebe – aka guitarist Michael Astley-Brown – stalks a landscape similar to that populated by bands such as Polyphia, Mogwai and Plini. Proudly math-rock orientated, with elements of djent and a side order of shred, Maebe's latest, *Rebirth. Relive. Repeat.*, focuses its 10 tracks on themes surrounding "the cyclical nature of mental health – that continual balance of damage and determination". After a majestic semi-orchestral first track, *Hello, It's Been A While*, the album finds its stride in the title track, a furious melange of harmonised guitar and melodic riffs, while tracks like *50 Words For Bro* contrast strong melody with brooding lead lines. Despite the gloomy-sounding underlying topic, the album is an upbeat, optimistic affair with melodic lines contrasting the heavier passages. Watch out for live gigs soon. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Harsh Realm*
For fans of: Polyphia, Plini, Deftones

Eric Clapton

The Definitive 24 Nights

Rhino (available now)

8/10

The full works from Clapton's early 90s prom season

EC's marathon stints at London's Royal Albert Hall in 1990 and '91 saw him perform separate blues, rock and orchestral nights, the edited highlights being issued subsequently as a double-CD and DVD package. Whereas fans might have thought that was the end of it, now there's a retrospective deluxe version available that extends the original release to a whopping six-hour event, covering six CDs and three Blu-rays, plus a book and other goodies. There are 36 previously unreleased performances, the idea being to represent complete concerts from each of the three genres Clapton originally played. Needless to say, it's a pricey affair, but if the *banquet de Eric* presented here is too rich for the palate, individual packages featuring the blues, rock and orchestral nights are available separately. Hardcore fans – dig in! **[DM]**

Standout track: *Layla*
For fans of: Clapton, Cream, BB King

THE LINEUP

Tones Behind The Tracks

The latest album from jazz guitarist and composer **Ralph Towner** enchants with beautiful playing on new pieces and jazz standards

Artist: Ralph Towner

Album: At First Light (ECM)

At First Sight sees Ralph Towner expand his own musical ideas from a chord progression or interval into pieces that tell their own stories

Apart from a solo career that began back in the early 1970s, nylon-string guitarist Ralph Towner has contributed to recordings from a wide range of artists, including Bill Bruford, Robben Ford and Weather Report. He also has the distinction of having had two craters on the moon named after his compositions, by the Apollo 15 astronauts. He's a multi-instrumentalist, having begun his musical journey playing brass instruments before teaching himself to play piano, but it was to be the guitar that formed the main focus of his music.

His latest album, *At First Light*, finds him playing solo nylon-string guitar on a collection of new pieces, plus jazz standards by Hoagy Carmichael and Jule Styne as well as a reading of the traditional song, *Danny Boy*.

You started off as a pianist, didn't you?

"Yeah, I had heard the Bill Evans trio and I wanted to know how it felt to play the piano like that. He was my model for the first few years, so I'm basically self-taught in terms of being a jazz pianist. Before that I played brass instruments from the time I was seven or eight years old, and played in bands, little concert bands, or whatever. But as far as the piano is concerned, my mother was a piano teacher so I was always immersed in piano, but more with hearing my mother's piano lessons. I was so stubborn, I wouldn't take piano lessons from her...

"I got really involved in my second year at university when I was introduced to the Bill Evans trio, but I played a lot of jazz and Dixieland on the trumpet. I started hearing music from my older brothers' record collections and was introduced to everything from Duke Ellington and Spike Jones to classical music, which I ended up studying as a composer."

What made you change from piano to guitar?

"I don't know, I just heard it. I was deeply involved in learning the piano, but I was struck by the guitar – how it sounded. I heard a student playing a classical piece, probably Bach. I can't remember the piece, but it was just the beauty of the instrument and the resemblance to a keyboard. It didn't enter my mind that this was going to be my major instrument because I could survive quite well in New York on the piano. I had just started to play with bands and do gigs and I gradually noticed that the players I played with were better and better and I started playing with well-known players. But when I heard the guitar it struck me. I don't know why I was so drawn to it.

"I finished college and I had nothing holding me back. I didn't have parents who said, 'Oh, go get a real job,' or something like that. I'd put a lot of time into getting my diploma as a classical composer and, on the side, developing jazz piano. I asked around, 'Where's a great guitar teacher?' And one of the professors said, 'Oh, Karl Scheit in Vienna is a great teacher,' and I almost said, 'Well, where's Vienna?' [Laughs] So I wrote a letter to the music academy where he taught and somehow they allowed me to audition. It was kind of obvious that I was a musician, so I was accepted. I somehow managed to get there with very little money, but things didn't cost much in Europe, really, as far as studying and education. Wonderful system, actually. So I managed to get to Vienna and then I locked myself in a tiny little room and practised and studied for seven days a week."

What's your approach when you're writing for solo guitar?

"I've evolved, of course, over the years. I'm still a bit of a songwriter, although I've written some orchestral music and stuff, but I still like to play an instrument, either the piano or the guitar. Just improvise a little bit until I stumble across an idea, which is either a chord progression or an interval. But you have to be able to discern what is an actual potential piece or

Ralph's musical career actually began on brass instruments. He's pictured here with jazz trumpeter Paolo Fresu, with whom he recorded an album titled *Chiaroscuro* in 2008

PHOTO BY STEFAN OLDENBURG/ECMRECORDS

"I was deeply involved in learning the piano, but I was struck by the guitar – how it sounded"

PHOTO BY CATERINA DI PERRI/ECMRECORDS

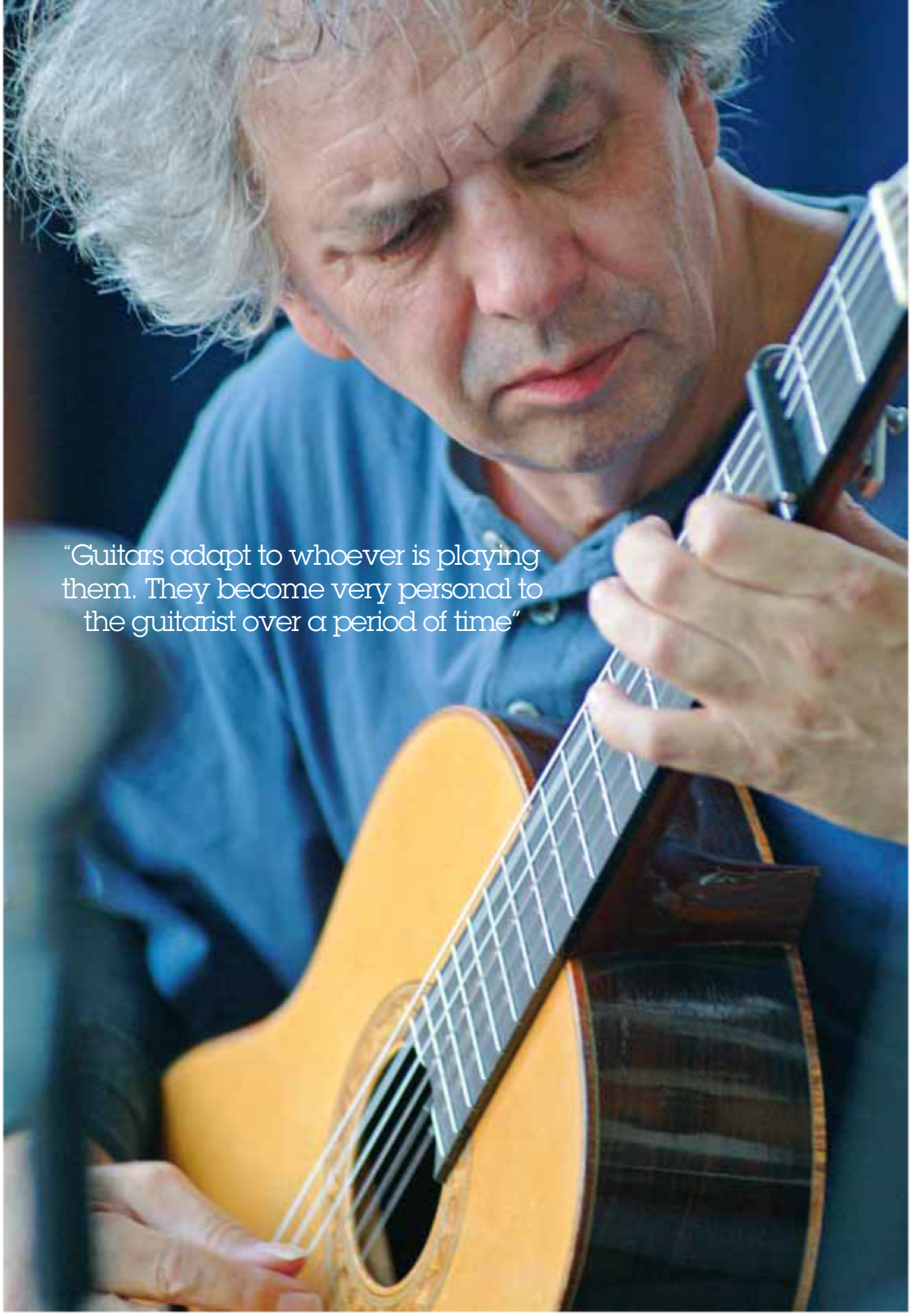


PHOTO BY PAOLO SORIANI/ECM RECORDS

Latest album, *At First Sight*, includes Ralph's arrangements of some standards, which have played an important part in his own musical history

just a nice collection of sounds. So when you find something that's a real idea – when I find it anyway – I can instantly identify it, hear it telescoping into a full piece. And so it works its way through. I think it's a little Darwinian because it's the same species all the way. If it's using a musical language that is set forward in the first few notes, you have to let it go where it wants to go, you can't force it. It's really interesting, this initial catalyst between two things. You're able to develop the story it's telling, music being its own language, and basically evolve that until it's accomplished something, in terms of having developed and revealed and pulled some surprises. It's all very emotional, also. I'm very emotional about music and I feel like it's possible to [express all the emotions] in music."

On the new album you've included a couple of standards, which you've said was a very deliberate choice – that you wanted to have arrangements of standards on the album as well as original pieces.

"Yeah, I mean, I played standards on the piano for years. I learned a lot of them from my brother's record collection. And then my mother would play the piano and would buy whole books of standards, so I learned how they functioned. But I was able to improvise from the first time I picked up an instrument – play counter melodies – and so I had a knack for it to start with. They're so much a part of my life and some of them are wonderful. Bill Evans was great at finding beautiful standards and making them into *jazz* standards. I was

PHOTO BY DÁNIEL VASS/ECM RECORDS

Ralph has been with the ECM label for over 40 years, during which time he's released solo classical guitar recordings as well as collaborations, including *Travel Guide* in 2012 with Wolfgang Muthspiel (centre) and Slava Grigoryan (right)

teaching myself how to do that as a result of hearing him. And the way they're originally written, I mean, the art of writing these songs that, even without lyrics, tell the story in a musical way. And so I always want to include some of those because they're written so well, and then put my own touches on them. I think it gives a little bit of variety to the record."

What is the make of nylon-string guitar that you play throughout *At First Light*?

"The guitar I'm using now – I've been using it for a few years – is made by an Australian maker, Jim Redgate. Previous to that I played a lot of Jeffrey Elliott's classical guitars. The first really good classical guitar that I bought was a Ramírez, an older one. Unfortunately, I only had it for less than a year and it got stolen in New York City. That was it, you know, it was gone. But at least I had experienced what it was like to own a beautiful instrument that I really liked to play. But I discovered these other instrument makers and I'm very happy with the Australian ones lately. But most of my recordings are done with the Jeffrey Elliott guitars."

Do you have any special requirements from the makers of your classical guitars?

"Oh, yeah. My preference is not to have any frequencies dominate or outweigh the highs and the lows and the mids, so you can control the whole thing. Sometimes certain notes will jump out, but a well-made guitar will be really even, if you can find one like that. The quality of the sound, of course, is pretty subjective. But, as I say, I like it very even, in terms of the dynamics that it has.

"Guitars adapt to whoever is playing them. They become very personal to the guitarist over a period of time. I can even play somebody else's guitar for two weeks and it will change according to how I play it. I mean, it's interesting. That's a nice thing about a guitar. I think all instruments might do that, but the guitar is particularly sensitive."

You don't use an amplifier on stage, preferring to mic up your guitar instead. What led you to make this decision?

"The reason, and it's kind of a musical one, is that as a classical guitarist you spend most of your life on an instrument trying to develop complete control and the illusion of tones sustaining even longer than they actually do, in terms of how loud you play each string, and how long it sustains. But the thing about amplification, although it's improved so much over the years, is that it's always sustaining beyond the dynamics of [what you're playing]. You're trying to hide certain notes and voices behind others, it gets to be that subtle. And the electric thing amplifies it too much, almost, so everything is sounding and it doesn't really sound like your sound, although it has improved.

> "As a classical guitarist, you try to develop complete control and the illusion of tones sustaining longer than they actually do"

"I spent all this time learning how to control the subtle things, and with the amplification you end up hearing the pitches and a little bit of the articulation, but you don't hear the dynamics quite as clearly between the individual strings. It depends on the player, but with amplification it comes out sounding more electric, which, as I say, defeats all your studies. But I play quite loudly and the microphones I use are very good – and you have to have a good tone when you're pushing it through a microphone. It's kind of telling the truth when you get it out in the audience, although it still has to go through speakers.

"So it's tricky doing a mix for a concert on a sound system, but I believe in the sound systems anyway. It's kind of amplified that way. But I use two really good mics that I choose between. One's a double ribbon mic I first started using in England. It's a Beyer[dynamic] M 160 double ribbon mic and then the other one is a Schoeps, a very nice mic that doesn't feed back and is used for orchestral recording. Great with the guitar, too, but it's very narrow – you know, it's placed in the orchestra and picks up the instrument you want it to without getting everything else." **[DM]**

Ralph Towner's latest album, *At First Light*, is available now on ECM. For more information, see the website ***www.ralphtowner.com***

NEVILLE'S ADVOCATE

Blues For Greeny

Being invited to speak and play at the preview of Peter Green's guitar sale at Bonhams was a huge privilege – and a worry, says **Neville Marten**

Peter Green was one of our most loved guitarists. He hit bullseye when it came to feel, note choice, touch and tone, and he stood apart from the crowd in other ways, too. His voice was special, and he exuded a spirituality that touched hearts all around the world. Peter's estate recently auctioned off his collection of guitars, other musical instruments and ephemera, and the sale was handled by Bonhams in London. When Bonhams invited me, along with current editor-in-chief, Jamie, and former helmsman Mick Taylor to form a panel, pick one guitar from the sale and discuss its place in Peter's musical history, we jumped at the chance.

"My gladness for having chosen such a slow and 'easy' song turned into mild terror. Why? I suddenly had all this space to worry about"

There would also be a band, put together by Oasis and High Flying Birds producer Paul Stacey, who is also a stunning musician and old friend. Separately, Paul asked Mick and me to contribute a tune to the evening's musical interlude. Again, a mighty privilege that was not to be turned down (I've done that too many times before!).

Paul and I discussed what track I was going to play and settled on the slow minor blues *Out Of Reach* with its reverb-drenched solos and typical Peter melodicism. The track was originally an outtake that Green had recorded with John Mayall on slide guitar but which resides on later versions of *A Hard Road*. Peter wrote the number, and in my view it shows his personal vulnerability long before tracks like *Man Of The World* or *The Green Manalishi*.

Getting back to my performance, I was relieved that it wasn't a fast or fiddly thing I had to negotiate but something slow and laconic. With my P-90 Les Paul into a pedalboard that Mick kindly provided, and a Fender Hot Rod DeVille amp, I felt ready. Luckily, we had time for a run-through before the invited previewers arrived.

It was then that my gladness for having chosen such a slow and 'easy' song turned into mild terror. Why? You ask. Well, the thing is, I suddenly had all this space to worry about what lick I was going to play next, where on the neck it was going to fall, whether I should stick to slow and deliberate or be panicked into a widdle-fest. Timing, too, becomes so much more crucial, as the notes are really exposed (my sound had a dribble of overdrive, but it was still very much on the clean side).

Luckily, I parked any ideas of fear, cock-up, panic attack or whatever else can invade the mind of the unwary guitarist, and my moment passed without incident. Lots of people said nice things, too. Mick played *Oh Well* superbly and traded solos with Paul (as I did, too), and the playing went down a storm.

Max Headroom

That general situation got me thinking about why stars like Clapton, Elton John or James Taylor populate their bands with musicians whose ability is so far above what they are required to play in these groups that mistakes are all but unheard of; they can concentrate on locking in and bringing maximum feel and groove to the situation. It relieves the pressure on the artist, too. Think of Jimmy Johnson, JT's bassist but in a previous life sideman for Allan Holdsworth, or guitarist Michael Landau, a stunning player whose role in the band is primarily to embellish. Then there's Steve Gadd and Nathan East with Clapton; East played alongside Larry Carlton in Fourplay, while Gadd's CV is A-list plus. On the day I found myself in my own comfort zone, with just enough headroom not to make a total arse of myself.

Thanks to Paul and Bonhams for inviting me, and thanks to Greeny for the inspiration. And, finally, even though the sale was peppered with things I could have made an offer on (that little African drum would look great in my flat), I resisted the temptation. Did any of you bid? If so, do let us know.

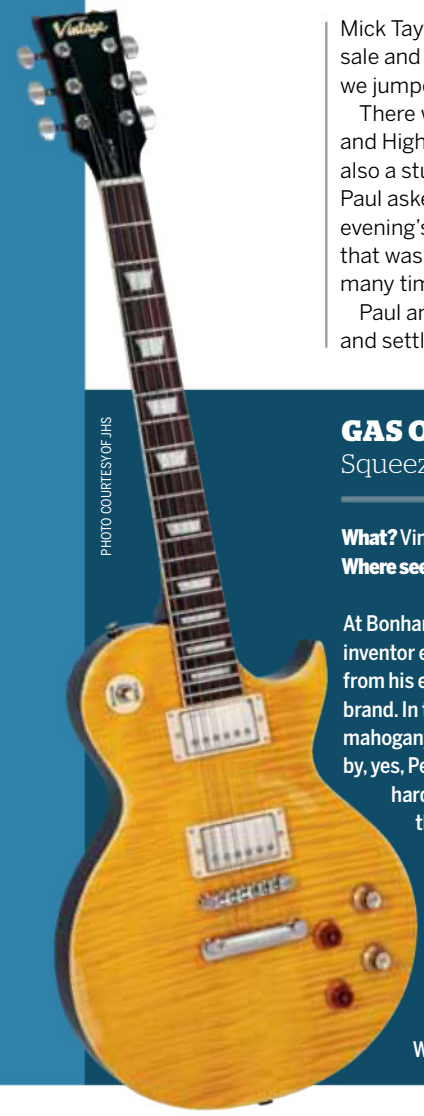


PHOTO COURTESY OF JHS

GAS OF THE MONTH

Squeeze My Lemon

What? Vintage V100 Icon, Distressed Lemon Drop
Where seen? www.pmtonline.co.uk **Price?** £445

At Bonhams I bumped into guitar designer and hardware inventor extraordinaire Trev Wilkinson, who you'll know from his excellent Fret-King range but also JHS's Vintage brand. In that line sits the V100 Icon 'Lemon Drop', a mahogany and maple LP-style instrument inspired by, yes, Peter Green. With their Wilkinson pickups and hardware, Vintage instruments punch well above their weight. And boasting a reversed neck humbucker and out-of-phase switch setting, the V100 does an excellent 'Greeny', too. Not only great-sounding, its modern neck carve and slightly offset cutaway makes it comfy right to the top. As Trev says, "If you can't build a great guitar for $5,000, go and do something else. The challenge is to make one for a 10th of that!" With the V100, we'd say he's succeeded.

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Under The Knife

As a last resort, **Alex Bishop** prepares to operate on a vintage Yamaha acoustic – but will it recover from the ordeal?

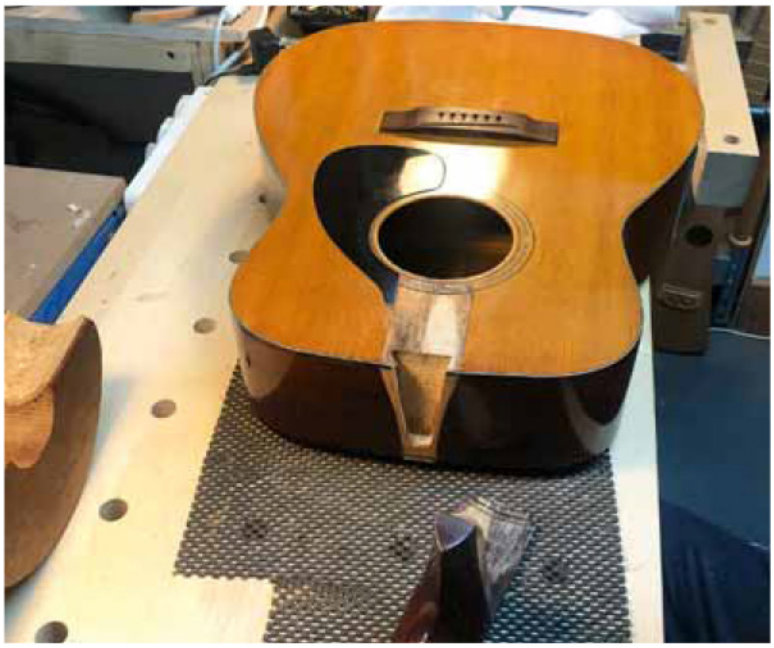
Repeatedly, old Father Time has proven to be an enemy of so many instruments; the unrelenting tension of taut steel strings will so often gradually buckle soundboards, warp necks and twist fingerboards beyond the realms of playability. While it's often the case that a thorough setup by an experienced luthier may rectify these problems, replacing frets, levelling fingerboards and crafting a new nut or saddle may not always be enough to fix a guitar when its carefully aligned geometry has been pulled out of shape by the malevolent forces of time. A new beginning is required; the guitar must be subjected to an emergency procedure.

"The true test of any aspiring guitar repairer is surely the daunting task of performing a 'neck reset' for the first time on a valuable guitar"

Like a nervous surgeon on the day of an important operation, the true test of any aspiring guitar repairer is surely the daunting task of performing a 'neck reset' for the first time on a valuable vintage acoustic guitar. The 1970s Yamaha FG-140 on my workbench this month needs precisely this work and – while this isn't exactly my first rodeo – a neck reset must always be approached with caution.

Essentially, this is the scenario: the combined pull of the strings on the guitar headstock and the soundboard can cause the instrument to pull up at each end, causing the strings to be too high from the surface of the fingerboard along the neck. Attempts to shave the bridge down or crank the truss rod may have already been made at this point, so the last resort is to reset the neck angle. This brings it a degree or two towards the back, both lowering the height of the strings and permitting a higher saddle, which will noticeably improve projection and tone. Well-aged and lightly built guitars are the most prone to this unfortunate demise, so it's often the finer-quality vintage guitars that end up under the knife for this kind of treatment. However, the invasive process of neck removal can be devastating if it doesn't work out.

To remove the neck, the first stage is to detach the tongue of the fingerboard from where it joins the soundboard. This is done by warming up the glue join (I like to use a heat gun) and tentatively probing with a sharp, broad palette knife. I am always mindful of the direction of the grain of the top; spruce in particular will easily tempt the blade into deviating from the join, driving it down through the softwood top instead, causing untold damage.



Freeing the neck from its body is the 'easy' part... the refitting process is a delicate one that requires precision and expert tools

PHOTO BY ALEX BISHOP

Separation Anxiety

Once I'm confident this is complete, I pluck the 15th fret from the fretboard. It so happens that a cavity between the join of the neck and body lies beneath this position, which can be verified by drilling a small hole (no bigger than the width of the fretwire) through the slot. Into this a thin hollow needle is inserted, attached via a hose to a steam cleaner. This device works great as a controllable source of hot, pressurised steam for injecting into the join. The glue gradually breaks down and by working the neck back and forth, further heat and moisture permeates across the join until – voila! – it separates and the neck is freed from the body.

Refitting the neck comes next, which is a much more delicate process compared with the hissing steam and cracking joins involved in its brutish removal. Razor-sharp chisels and precision knives are employed to gently pare away wood around the base of the heel. Dependent upon intricate woodworking and patient craftsmanship, the newly fitted neck must dovetail perfectly into the body at precisely the correct angle for optimum playability.

It's hard to be completely confident that the procedure has worked until the guitar gets its strings on for the first time. It only takes a few chords for me to realise it really sings; not only does the guitar possess a powerful new voice but it does so effortlessly, my fingers barely registering the frets as I explore the fretboard. Its life extended, I conclude the procedure has been a success. Let's hope it enjoys another healthy 50 years before we meet again.

ER-2

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Chord Vocabulary (PART 2)

Richard Barrett delves into different voicings of the major 7th, helping you explore the fretboard via various chord shapes

Regular readers will have seen that in the first part of this topic in last issue I was taking a look at the way chords can be varied and moved around the fretboard, sometimes opening up the possibility of alternative names due to the different inversions or potential context in a progression. Here in Part 2, I would like to realise that idea more fully by taking the well-loved major 7th chord and shifting it to various positions – with a few alterations here and there.

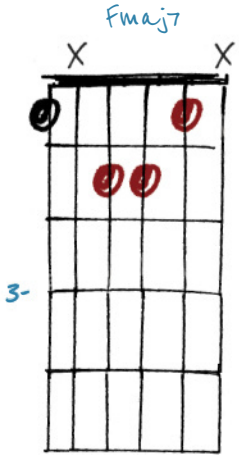
The overarching concept is that while scales are incredibly useful, as guitar players we often relate more comfortably to shapes, whether this signifies the pentatonic boxes or the recognition of a chord shape traced on the fretboard when playing an arpeggio. We'll also touch on some possibilities for shifting a bass note to effect a chord change, while keeping much of the harmony static. It's all about getting comfortable with with using all areas of the fretboard, which can significantly benefit your solos and chord playing. G

PHOTO BY JOSEPH BRANSTON/FUTURE MUSIC MAGAZINE

You'll notice that major 7th notes appear frequently in Nile Rodgers' playing

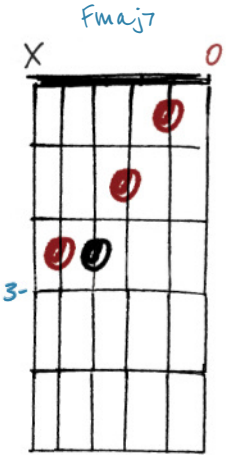
Example 1

This Fmaj7 can be seen as an A minor with an F bass. This tells us that A minor-based licks can work over F major chords, unlocking new melodic ideas. The fifth string (A) is muted. It wouldn't make a discord, but it would sound a bit congested in the low-end. Omitting notes like this is common practice in the jazz world. Raise that F bass note to F# for F#m7♭5!



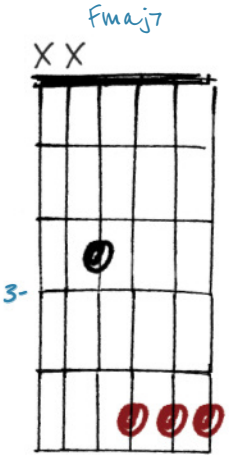
Example 2

This Fmaj7 has a C in the bass, but this isn't particularly a distinguishing feature; it just sounds fuller on its own. You could omit this and raise the F on the fourth string to make F#m7♭5, or go one further to add in the open fifth string (A) to give you Amin6.



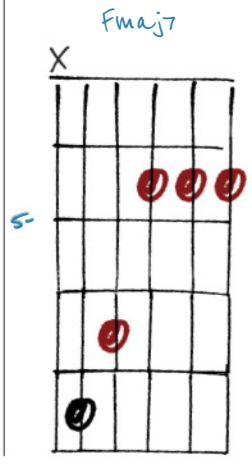
Example 3

Nile Rodgers has been known to use this voicing of the maj7 chord (in this case Fmaj7). It's easy to move around in a melodic 'chord melody' way: check out the intro to Sister Sledge's *Thinking Of You*. As with Examples 1 and 2, you could raise the F (found here on the fourth string) to F# for an F#m7♭5. These sit very nicely together.



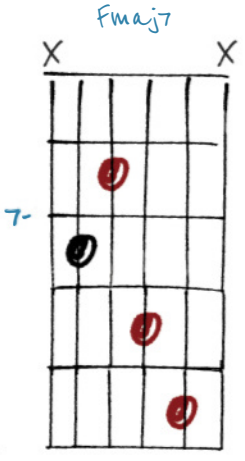
Example 4

Using the same grouping of notes at the top, this version of Fmaj7 lays out all the intervals in a very neat way, ideal as a starting point for playing arpeggios/arpeggiated chords. If you can reach it, the F on the fifth string can be raised to F# for F#m7♭5, though this might be more comfortable played one note at a time as an arpeggio.



Example 5

This Fmaj7 is something of an odd one out. Because the stacking of notes jumps from Root (F) to major 3rd (A) to major 7th (E) then another major 3rd on the second string, without the 5th (C), there is no opportunity to create an F#m7♭5 by simply raising the F (on the fifth string here). However, this could give us a nice F#min7!



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STAR LETTER

CAVEAT EMPTOR

Strings can have a knock-on effect on your tone... especially if they're knock-offs

Just recently I decided to change the gauge of strings on my three-year-old Les Paul from 10s to nines. I don't play in a band, just at home, and so I hardly ever change strings; as long as they stay in tune I'm happy. I ordered three sets of Ernie Ball strings, including free postage, for £11 on eBay. The photos of the packets looked genuine, so naturally, in order to save money, that was what I went for.

Firstly, the strings took three weeks to arrive. It merely stated "Free Economy Delivery" and that the strings were "Located in: Dunstable, United Kingdom". In any case, after fitting the strings the A and D strings were buzzing terribly. I thought that since I'd dropped from 10s to nines the guitar might need a setup. After doing everything from adjusting the neck to setting the bridge, it still sounded more like a sitar than a guitar, and so I gave up and took it to a luthier for a setup, costing £50. Still no luck. Then he noticed the Tune-o-matic bridge was slightly concave and suggested very slightly filing the string slots to compensate.

After taking it home it got worse. So I bought a new Tune-o-matic bridge for £48... but the A and D strings still buzzed. Back to the luthier I go (no charge this time). We were baffled. The process of elimination meant it had to be the strings. He swapped them over and the buzzing went. So not only were the strings fake, they were also defective.

I would advise people to buy strings from a guitar shop or from a reputable online source and remember if anything sounds too good to be true, stay away. It cost over £100 for the sake of saving a few pounds.

Neil Booth

Buyer beware indeed, Neil. I guess we're so used to strings being hassle-free online purchases that it's easy to forget there are scammers out there. It does beg some interesting questions, though. Presumably no-one operates a string-making factory with the express intent of making defective strings, so it's hard to avoid the conclusion that the dodgy strings you bought must have been rejects from a workaday OEM string factory that had been dishonestly sold on as big-brand premium items instead of being binned. We're sorry you got stung, but thanks for sharing your experience so readers might avoid the same fate. And, as a consolation, we're awarding you this month's Star Letter prize. Have any other readers had any long-distance mail-order nightmares of a similar kind?

VOX AMPLIFICATION LTD.

Each issue, the Star Letter will win a pair of Vox VGH AC30 guitar amplifier headphones!
www.voxamps.com

Anthony Lloyd's amp setup allows for easier accessibility

LANEY MOD

I thought you may be interested in my minor mod to my Laney Hardcore MXD 15 amp. Having mobility problems I have found it difficult to keep bending down to alter settings on my amp, unable to afford a proper amp head and separate speaker. I decided to mod my Laney by making it an amp head and speaker cabinet. So now I can have the amp head on my desk and the speaker on the floor, just a simple case of leaning over to alter any settings while still sitting down. I'm not interested in pedals so this was the only option. Where do you think would be the best place for the speaker to be? Any suggestions would be appreciated.

Anthony Lloyd

Thanks, Anthony – ideally the speaker would be elevated off the floor a bit and be facing you. A chair would work as a stopgap or you could place the cab on a robust sideboard or similar. But we'd recommend buying a purpose-built monitor stand from a brand such as Tourtech. These only cost around £20 or so but will elevate your guitar cab a bit and tilt it back so your ears get the benefit of its full sound. Monitor stands are easily moved about so you can experiment with where the cab sits in relation to you and find the best spot. They also fold up when not in use, so they don't get in the way. Hope that helps.

MOD SHOP WINNER

Well, how fortunate was I to win the Fender Mod Shop Telecaster designed by your own Nev Marten? (See this issue's Wishlist, page 24.) It now sits in pride of place at the side of my chair, ready when I am. I have quite a few guitars: two Gretsches, two Epiphones – a Sheraton and a 355 – two Strats, a Brian May Red Special, a Les Paul Tribute and, my favourites, a Baja Tele and Tele Pro II. Now a third beautiful Tele in Burgundy Metallic Mist courtesy of *Guitarist*. I generally rotate playing each monthly or thereabouts so each receives some love.

The Fender Mod Shop competition prize in its new home

I learnt guitar over 60 years ago to accompany my singing, did a short spell in the clubs and pubs as a duo, but since about the 90s, I just play the odd guitar at home. In the past eight to 10 years I fell in love with guitars and expanding my playing, hence slowly collecting guitars. This Tele now ends my collection as I can't justify or find room for more – plus complaints from the other half!

So, thank you, *Guitarist*, for the joy you've given me and for Nev's wonderful design that now belongs to this old fellow to enjoy.

Rob Tew

Wish you joy of your new guitar, Rob. We thought it looked stunning when it turned up at the photo studio, even better than expected. You've now got a trio of Teles it would seem and the newcomer has a few extra tricks up its sleeve with the humbucker at the neck and the Bigsby. A perfect, atmospheric companion for jamming at home – enjoy!

NEW FOR OLD

I started playing electric guitar in 1986 and have been buying this fine magazine on and off (mainly on) ever since then. I remember back in the 80s reading about 1960s Fenders and Gibsons and wondering what the fuss was with 20-year-old-plus guitars when you could buy brand-new models loaded with the latest tech. Other than my very first Aria Pro II starter guitar, I have kept everything I have ever bought and consequently have a 1986 PRS Custom 24 and a 1991 Fender Strat Plus Deluxe, both now over 30 years old and going strong. It blows my mind to think that these are now 'vintage', that the Marshall Bluesbreaker pedal I bought new in 1991 has just been reissued, and that we are now even seeing terrible old rack effects units talked about with sentimentality.

Ironically, I still have no ambition to own a vintage guitar, even if I do by default. The quality of newly manufactured models is so damn high and the prices are amazing that to spend huge money on old guitars

just doesn't make any sense to me. Sure, there are the ones that got away, the rarities that are no longer available and we wished we had bought at the time. For me, I am convinced my life would have turned out differently had I bought a custom Chris Larkin guitar at the London Guitar Show held at the Barbican Centre in the 80s. He was willing to sell me one of his beautifully made demo guitars for £350 and I was all set to go down the next day with the cash – but got fogged in and couldn't make it.

Alex Myers

Thanks for writing in with your 'one that got away' story about the Chris Larkin guitar and your reflections on the value of hanging onto stuff. You're not the only person we've heard of who, having made a purchase, doesn't ever sell the gear again. The thrill of the chase can get addictive and many of us have a parallel hobby in buying and selling guitars. But the payoff for buying quality gear and hanging onto it is that you get to know it through and through and, in time, your good new purchase becomes desirable vintage in its own right!

FAIR HEARING

Thank you for publishing my letter in issue 498. I am very grateful for John Guy's thoughtful response in the 500th edition. Certainly the problem is more prevalent in the right ear, when playing, because of the proximity of the soundhole. The audiologist rang me shortly after my letter was published and her observations on the microphones were very similar to those made by John Guy. I have not, as yet, explored non-NHS aid options, but if any of your readers have experience of them, it would be interesting to see how they compare.

The last gig I played was in Porthtowan on the 10 June, where I simply performed without the hearing aids. In an amplified live environment there are other audio challenges, but oddly enough hearing myself was actually not one of them.

Here's to the next 500 issues of the *Guitarist*!

Ralph Morse

Thanks, Ralph – glad to be of help and cheers for the kind words on our 500th! If any other readers have useful tips for users of hearing aids, please write in and we'll print the best.

ARIA MYSTERY: SOLVED?

Just got my copy of issue 500 – thanks for all the extras! In the Feedback letter about the ornate Aria guitar, an internet search revealed that it is an "extremely rare" Aria Les Paul Custom Agent from 1974. It seems their guitars were ordered by Hoshino, a distributor, and made by the Matsumoku factory. They also ordered and distributed the Ibanez 2405 LP-Style Custom Agent at around the same time, which some people say were made by Matsumoku and some say Fuji Gen. There's plenty of examples of the Ibanez guitar on the net and you can see the similarities.

Mark Bourne

With a little help from our eagle-eyed readers, Peter Simmonds now has some history behind the mystery of his Aria single-cut

I noticed the letter from Peter Simmonds in issue 500 showing an ornate Aria L-type. I have a similar model but made under the Antoria brand name. I bought this in 1975, and still have it. To be honest, I'd never seen the Aria version, but it's very similar. Ibanez also made a similar guitar, the 2405, which is very close.

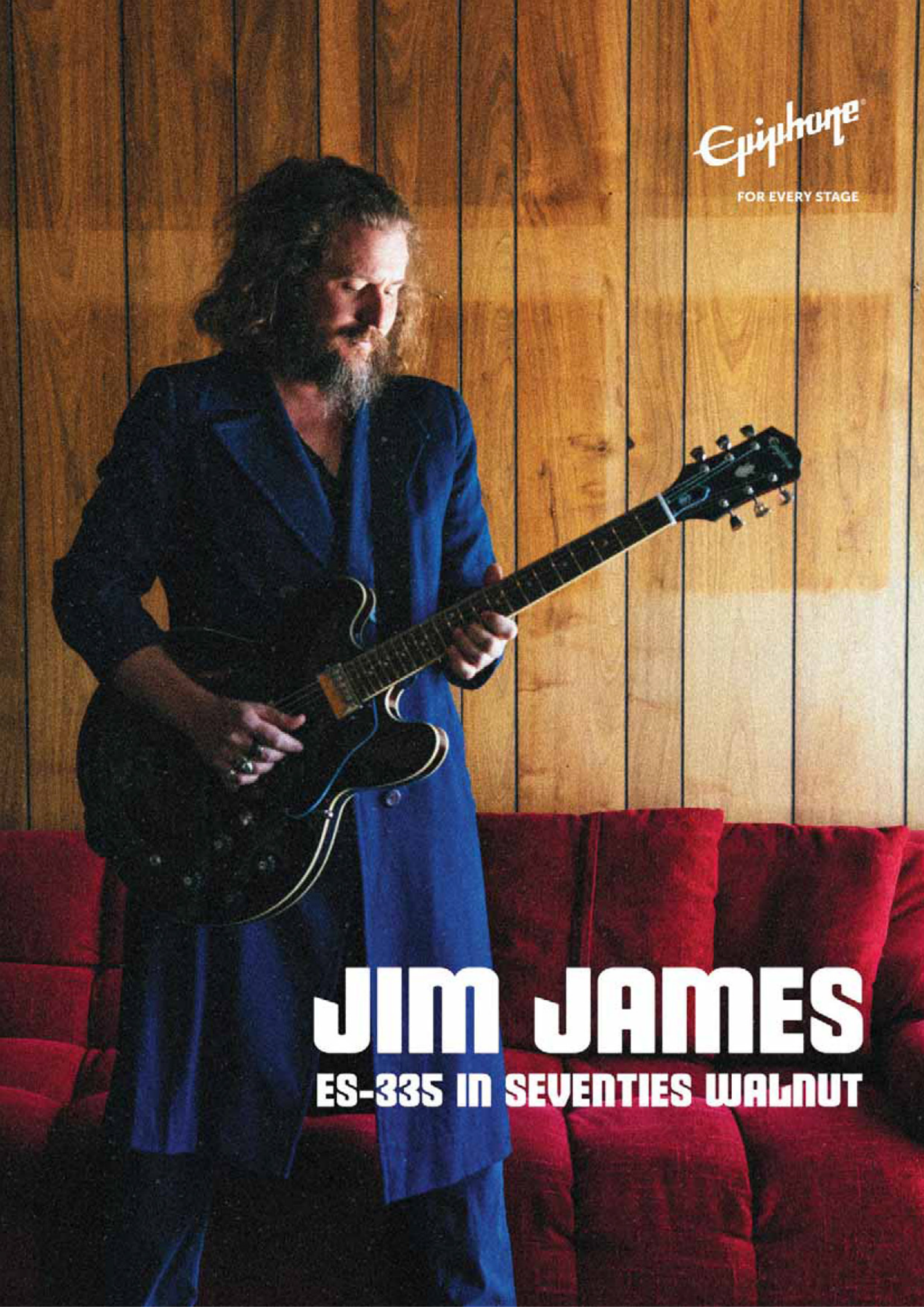
I suspect the same factory made the guitar for at least three companies, with a few cosmetic differences (ie, purfling, and some of the inlays are slightly different), which was quite common then, as now. The Antoria article I found mentions they were copies of a rare Gibson, so rare I can't find it! I think the headstock is borrowed from a mandolin, and there were other guitars made at the time with fancy inlays, and so on. The Antoria is also called a 2405, same as the Ibanez, and/or Custom 74/Memphis Deluxe.

Sorry I don't have any more information on the Aria, but I hope this helps.

Keith Deal

Thanks Mark and Keith for getting in touch, your sleuthing has paid off – the lawsuit-inviting Aria 'Les Paul Custom Agent' (hard not to think of someone checking your car boot at a ferry terminal) seems to indeed be the guitar. But, like all good international mysteries, the plot thickens, as it turns out the 'Agent' has more than one identity. As well as the Ibanez 2405 variant you both mentioned, it seems Keith has discovered that Antoria marketed an almost identical guitar that was also known, equally cheekily, as the 'Florentine Les Paul'! Even Jason Bourne didn't have as many alternate identities... So thanks, Mark and Keith, your diligent hunt has made an arrest!

Your letters to the *Guitarist* editor. Drop us a line at guitarist@futurenet.com


Epiphone
FOR EVERY STAGE
JIM JAMES
ES-335 IN SEVENTIES WALNUT

IN THE NAME OF LOVE

When it came to remaking 40 classic U2 tracks for *Songs Of Surrender*, The Edge was guided by his heart and one grand idea – "to make intimacy the new version of punk rock"

Words Joe Bosso

*This feature first appeared in the June 2023 edition of *Guitar Player*

During the course of their four-decade-plus career, U2 have been a daringly stubborn, forward-thinking lot, rarely repeating a proven formula, and constantly searching for the next big idea. Indeed, their momentum seems to have always been fuelled by an almost Bowie-esque need for experimentation. Sometimes the gambits paid off spectacularly (the rich Americana textures of *The Joshua Tree* were traded for *Achtung Baby*'s postmodern European art-rock); other times, not so much (the techno dance-heavy *Pop* ranks as their most under-appreciated effort). But in each case, the band made it clear they weren't running to stand still, and whether they delighted their fans or occasionally mystified them, their true measure of success was guided by their indefatigable quest for change.

And now they've really gone and done it. U2's latest project – *Songs Of Surrender*, a whopping collection of 40 "reimagined" songs from their back catalogue – is one that will invariably provoke intense reactions, both good and bad, from their fans, many of whom regard the band's original recordings as sacrosanct. For The Edge, the driving force behind the four-disc set (he's credited as producer, and he created much of the instrumentation), the notion of merely tweaking musical themes was one he rejected out of hand. Simply put, revisiting the past meant throwing a whole lot of it out the window.

"We're not just treading lightly on hallowed ground. We're going in with jack boots," he says with a laugh. "That was our early decision: 'Are we going to suspend reverence here and just go for it?' And we decided to go for it because we thought we'd get into more interesting territory if we gave ourselves that freedom." He pauses, then smiles mischievously. "But we also had an overriding idea, which was to make intimacy the new version of punk rock for us."

Punk rock in 2023, at least in The Edge's world, is bathed in the lush sound of acoustics (for those thirsting for the guitarist's ringing, soaring, effects-treated electric six-strings, adjust your expectations immediately). This is a softer, quieter, laid-back version of punk rock (and U2) and, admittedly, it takes the ears a while to adjust. The once anthemic *Pride (In The Name Of Love)* is now stripped down, slowed down and sung by Bono in a lower register. It doesn't so much confront you as it gradually seeps into your senses. Likewise, the youthful harmonic urgency of *11 O'Clock Tick Tock* now moves at a more mature pace, with The Edge performing a delicately plucked nylon-string solo in place of the original's jarring electric lead.

On some tracks, he dispenses with guitars altogether. The chiming electric rhythm of *Where The Streets Have No Name* is nowhere to be found on what is now a haunting hymn framed by synths and strings. Similarly, *Stories For Boys*, sung by The Edge and devoid of the guitarist's cavernous leads, has been transformed from a surging rocker into an absorbing piano elegy. Throughout most of the album, however, over minimal and sometimes no percussion at all, he's briskly strumming and chugging away (and on a few songs, notably *Ordinary Love*, he demonstrates he's an artful and creative fingerpicker), breaking down chordal and lead arrangements to their bare essentials. On cuts like *Sunday Bloody Sunday* and *Until The End*

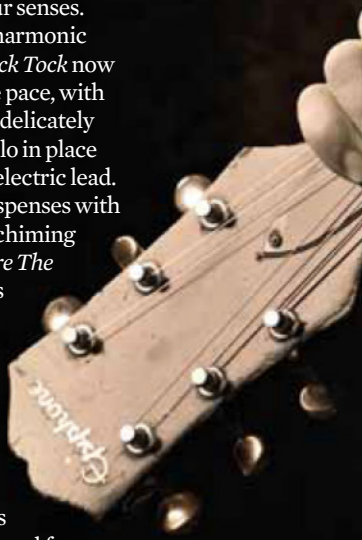


PHOTO BY OLAF HEINE STUDIO

Of The World, he performs virtual note-for-note versions of his famous solos, while on *The Fly*, now a slinky and sultry mood piece, he splashes twangy licks over a booming bed of bass guitars.

Not everything gets a drastic makeover. *Vertigo* and *Desire* (here with heavily treated acoustics) still rock and swing as hard as ever, and in their new spare forms, they're the best damn campfire songs around. For the most part, though, the emphasis is on reinvention, and each track brings with it a new surprise. The biggest revelation perhaps comes in the form of a question – why would a band so revered for its sense of grandeur want to reel it all in?

The Edge takes it on directly and thoughtfully. "It's not something we're famous for – because we grew up on stage in little sweaty clubs in America and Europe," he says. "Our challenge was always to get to that [person] at the back of the room, somebody who isn't really a fan or isn't paying attention. There was always an intense pitch to our music early on. So my thought here was, 'Let's take minimalism to the nth degree, if it's appropriate.' And on a lot of these songs, it worked. We left just the bare skeletons of the original arrangements in terms of themes and hooks, taking things down to a really light touch."

He's keenly aware that "going in with jack boots" was going to be met with varying responses – and, if anything, that appears to be the overarching point. "For this to be meaningful, we didn't want to recreate something that was already out there and was well-recognised," he says. "It was, 'What happens when you take the band away and you remove from the mix everything we're famous for?' You allow the songs to stand on their own."

You're one of the most distinctive and copied players of the past 40 years. Usually we talk about some new wild sound you've come up with or a new pedal you've discovered. You're not doing that here. [Edge laughs] Was that scary? Exciting? Both?

"It was both. I mean, not scary, really. When we started this project, there was no expectation. We could have done a couple of weeks on it, and if we weren't excited by the results, it never would have seen the light of day. As it happened, the more I got into it, the more excited I got. I thought, 'There really is something to this.' For me, the pivot was *Stories For Boys*, from the first album [1980's *Boy*]. I hit on this piano approach that's so different from the original. I sang a demo vocal of it and presented it to Bono, assuming he would do his own lead vocal. He said, 'Edge, I love this! You should sing it, and let's work on the lyrics to update it and give it a different twist.'

"Because there was no pressure or expectation, and just through the sheer thrill of doing this, I think the whole collection has a kind of freedom to it, a lightness. I don't think U2 fans have ever heard the band like this."

"We're not just treading lightly on hallowed ground. We're going in with jack boots… We thought we'd get into more interesting territory"

There is that old saying, 'A good song is one you can play on an acoustic guitar…'

"Yeah. Some of our producers have stressed that to us over the years, almost as an appeal. Steve Lillywhite would say, 'Would you just play the song on an acoustic guitar? That's how we'll see what we really have.' Of course, that's something we rarely did, but when we did it was useful. This collection sort of proves that if songs hold together, they really are indestructible. You can take huge liberties with that, and they'll hold up."

There is some precedent for this with you guys. You and Bono played *Ordinary Love* and *Stuck In A Moment You Can't Get Out Of* acoustically on TV shows.

"We have. It's interesting that some of those arrangements became the more iconic versions. *Ordinary Love* is a good example. *Every Breaking Wave* became a very big live song, and it was stripped right down to just piano and voice. That was really encouraging, learning that paring it back can be good for the song."

For this collection, can you pinpoint the moment when you said, "Let's try this"? Was it literally you sitting at home playing a song on an acoustic that you had only played on an electric guitar'?

"There were actually a couple of moments. The great fun of this project was also trying to take some of the deep catalogue songs that never became particularly well known and giving them a chance to shine. One of the moments of realisation was *If God Will Send His*

The Edge performs an acoustic set with Bono in a Kyiv subway station/bomb shelter, May 2022. The setlist featured U2 classics *With Or Without You*, *One* and *Angel Of Harlem*, as well as a cover of Ben E King's *Stand By Me*

PHOTO BY SERGEI SUPINSKY/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

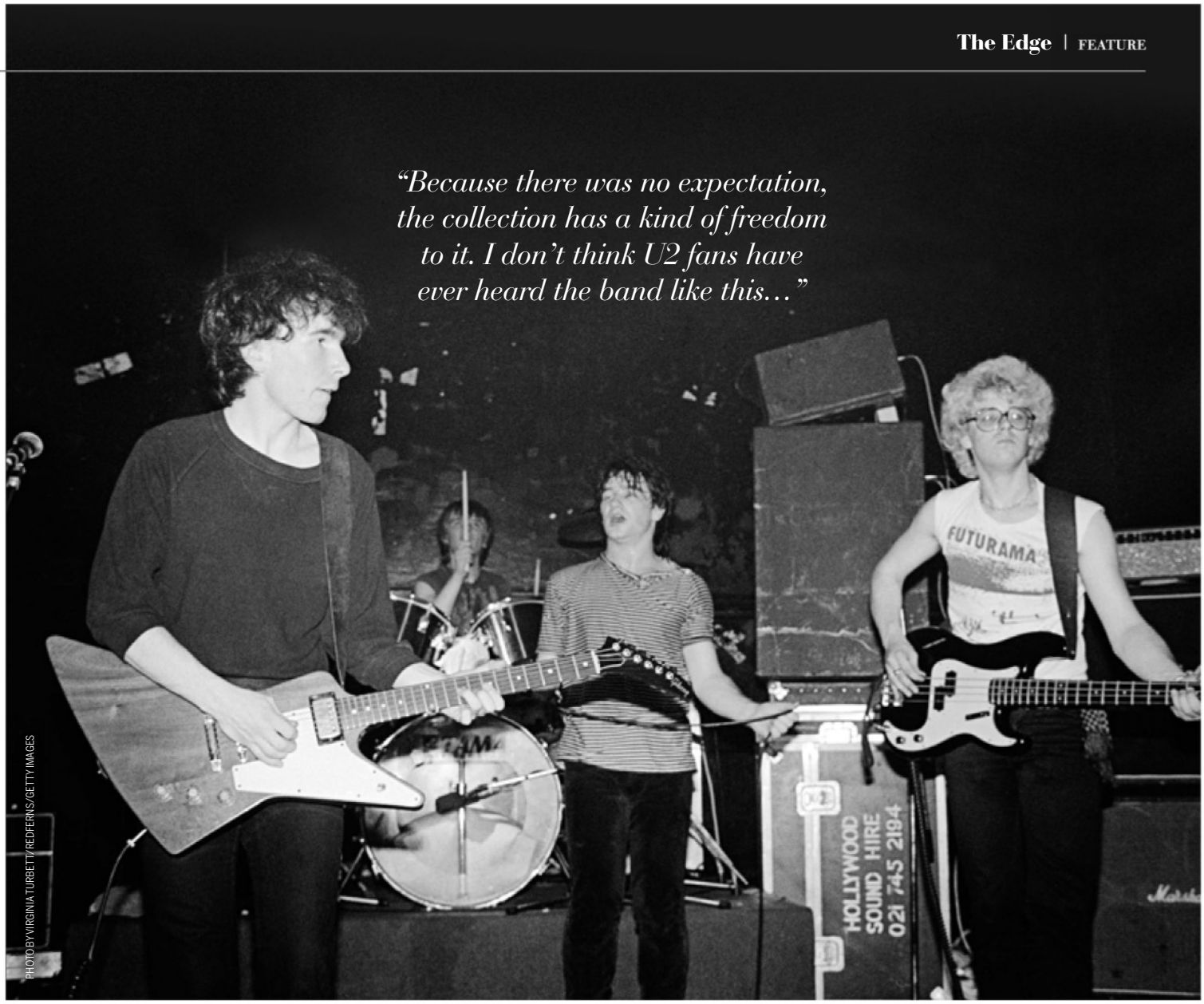


PHOTO BY VIRGINIA TURBETT/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Angels, from the *Pop* album. It was a single, but we always felt as if we'd missed it. The problem wasn't the lyric or melody; the flow of chords didn't do justice to what Bono had done. So I completely rearranged the chordal progressions, and now I feel like it's a new song. It's a better song. That was greatly encouraging.

"With some of other more obscure songs, I tested that idea. *Dirty Day* was one of the first songs I played on acoustic, and that's a pretty nasty guitar-based tune on *Zooropa* – not a particularly well-known song. I always liked its essence, and then playing it very simply on acoustic guitar, it really held up.

"Some of the last things we did were the big classic songs. But even in that process, say, with *Pride (In The Name Of Love)*, I realised that the solo didn't really make sense by stripping it back, so I kind of wrote an orchestral middle section to add some light and shade to the arrangement. There was a lot of fun there."

Was there a particular acoustic guitar that really guided your approach throughout the project?

"I've been buying some vintage guitars, and some of them are absolutely amazing. Like these guitars from the 40s are so pure and small sounding, but they're so musical. That was a big revelation. Being so used to these big dreadnought guitars, I thought these smaller guitars had so much personality. There was a particular guitar that was my go-to, a 1947 Martin 0-18, and it's a beauty. I was with my son, Levi, in McCabe's in Santa Monica. He was buying a pedal, and I was staring at this guitar in a case. I was like, 'Mmm, do you mind if I try this guitar?' I instantly fell in love with it.

"Also, I was trying to find ways to add other slightly more percussive sounds, so I dug an old hammered dulcimer out of the back of a closet. I'd never played it, so I was learning how to play this thing. That was a lot of fun."

In the early days, U2's goal was to be so intense, audiences in clubs had to pay attention. The new album celebrates the unvarnished song beneath the sound and fury

I was talking with Melissa Manchester, who also re-recorded some songs from her catalogue. She told me that one of her reasons for doing so was, after singing these songs for almost 50 years, she felt like she had grown into them. Did you have a similar feeling about your own songs?

"Yes, I think that did happen. I also think that gave us the inspiration, in some cases, for new lyrics. The essence of the song felt more relevant from this perspective. Like with *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, when we got to the last verse, Bono said, 'I think there's a better verse here.' So now that song has a new final verse. With the benefit of a bit of time from when that song was first inspired, from the safety of the peace that we now enjoy in Ireland, we could afford to be a little more direct. Without being overt, that lyric now addresses some of the history and incidents that inspired that song, which we probably wouldn't have felt comfortable addressing at the time."

PHOTO BY PAUL MORIGI/GETTY IMAGES

You once said that if you were having a problem writing a song, you'd crank up the effects and see where they might take you. Was it a challenge reapproaching the songs without those effects?
"In most cases, I think I was able to use the musical themes from the original recordings, but I would abstract them. In the initial instance, we were probably struggling to find something with thematic power that would drive the song and support the vocals. Here, it's the opposite. It's like, 'How much can we take away?' It was less pressure, in a way. We were still being creative, but there was no sense that we hadn't arrived with a song that couldn't stand on its own.

"I think we were maybe inspired by what we were all going through with the lockdown, where your entire life was reduced to the bare minimum [laughs]. It's what we were doing with our song arrangements."

Obviously, you've played acoustic in the past, but here you're laser-focused on it. As a player, did that present some new challenges from a technique standpoint?
"Definitely. I was playing six-string, and I did some 12-string and some Spanish guitar. I played a beautiful old flamenco guitar that was made for me by Lowden. Yeah, I really had to stretch. But what it also did for me was, it gave me a real appreciation for the great acoustic guitar players, along with some of the techniques that I haven't mastered. Certain picking techniques – I'm going to relish being a student again and becoming better versed in that. It's a fascinating world. I don't profess to be a master in these areas, but I'm such a fan."

Songs Of Surrender allowed The Edge to expand his guitar skills beyond the electric, giving him "real appreciation for the great acoustic guitar players, along with some techniques I haven't mastered. I'm going to relish being a student again"

"Bono is [now] a better interpreter of songs than he's ever been. That was the ultimate goal – to serve the song by serving the singer"

I was struck by the songs you covered but also some that you didn't, like *Bullet The Blue Sky* and *The Electric Co.* Did you try them but you weren't happy with where they went?
"We didn't do *Bullet The Blue Sky*, no. There were a few that, for one reason or another, we weren't sure we found a new place. *Running To Stand Still* – I thought that it was already in a minimal form, so I didn't know if we would find a new angle there. With *Bullet*, I don't think we got around to it. I think maybe we felt that we'd already done so much from that album. We'd already gotten a few from *The Joshua Tree*. That was a dilemma, as well, not to overly concentrate on one or two albums.

"Some were a challenge in a good way. *Beautiful Day* and *With Or Without You*, we tried them multiple ways; we tried them very organic, and then, particularly *With Or Without You*, we thought that we should go very abstract. That was a fun process."

When I heard about the project but hadn't seen the track list, I thought, 'No way will they do *The Fly*.' The original is such a gonzo, psychedelic electric guitar song.
"[Laughs] It is."

But you ended up doing it, and you turned it into a much darker piece.
"The breakthrough with that song was, we decided we wouldn't have a lead guitar; we'd just have two basses, so Adam [Clayton] and I both played. The two bass performances come together to make this a very different version of *The Fly*. As you say, it's kind of psychedelic, but it's got a dark quality. I love it. Again, with the solos, it's like, 'What do you do with that?' The dulcimer came in very handy."

On some other solos, like on *Till The End Of The World* and *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, you stick pretty close to how you originally played them.
"Yep."

Did you try them another way first?
"I don't know. In those cases, I just felt that they were some of the key thematic ideas. Take *City Of Blinding Lights*: we kept some of those big guitar hooks, but they're now played in a different form. With some, I was happy to maintain the original ideas, but with others, it was obvious that something new had to happen. On *Out Of Control*, a whole new solo idea spontaneously happened.

"There were no rules with this project – that was the great thing. Bono kicked up a pretty serious media furore recently when he admitted that some of his early vocal recordings were a source of a certain amount of embarrassment for him. You can hear the strain in his voice. Mind you, it never even occurred to us in those days to lower the key to better fit his range.

"Today, with each arrangement, we were able to go, 'Where do you want to pitch this one?' I've got a

similar vocal range to Bono, so I was able to take some good guesses for what would work for him. It was like tailoring the songs to suit him as a singer. At this point in his life, I think he's a better interpreter of songs than he's ever been. That was the ultimate goal – to serve the song by serving the singer."

You're something of the ultimate gear guy. On this project, did you learn anything new about mic'ing acoustic guitars?

"Very often, I would do a quick initial acoustic demo at home. If I was in Dublin, I would be by the piano. And to my surprise, the engineers on occasion would go, 'Whoa, that's amazing. How did you get that sound?' I think it was because I had some really nice microphones. I found this one by Aston, an English mic that's currently in production. It's a very warm-sounding mic for acoustic guitars.

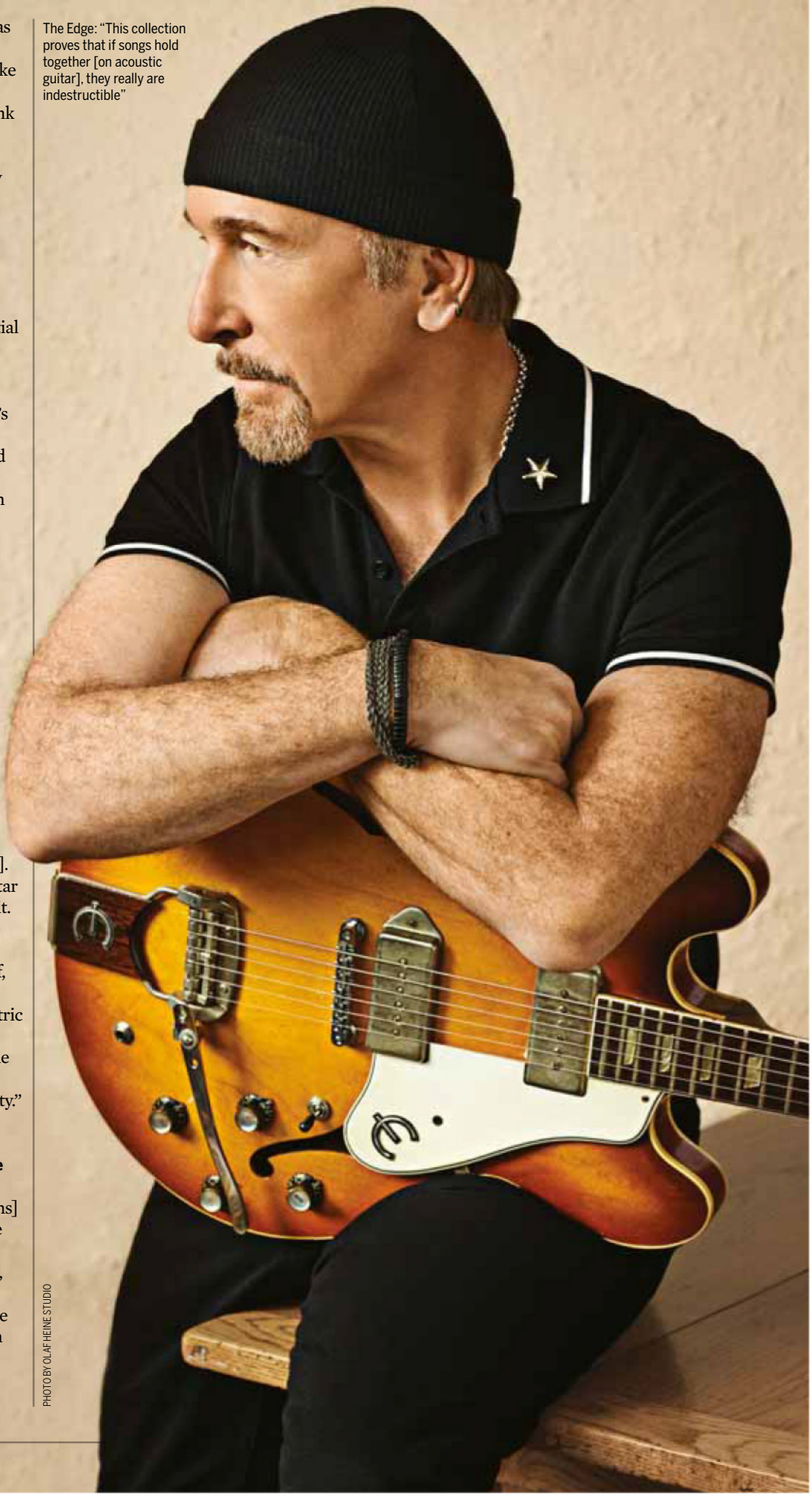
"Some of those recordings I made ended up on the album. It was that kind of project. Some of it was done in a proper recording studio in London, but a few were literally recorded in my bedroom."

Now that you've spent a considerable amount of time focused on the acoustic guitar, do you think you might go back to exploring new sounds on the electric with a fresh attitude?

"I know the answer to that [laughs]. I've been working a lot on new guitar music, and I'm very excited about it. It's at that prototype stage where... who knows? But the answer to the question is 'yes'. I'm finding myself, for the first time in a little while, getting very excited about the electric guitar again. Maybe it's something to do with the lockdown, having the time to not do very much. For me, that was such a creative opportunity."

Were it not for the lockdown, would you have done this massive acoustic project?

"We'll never know, will we? [Laughs] We were due for some time off. We finished our last show in India in December of 2019. We came home, and almost immediately the world was turned upside down. That time would have been spent working on ideas and early stage new songs. And we are. We have a lot of great material in the pipeline." G



The Edge: "This collection proves that if songs hold together [on acoustic guitar], they really are indestructible"

PHOTO BY OLAF HEINE STUDIO

VOLUME
TONE
TONE

Ultimate STRATS

The Strat is the most famous electric of all time – the original guitar for all seasons. But which version represents the pinnacle of its evolution? We take a deep dive into Leo's masterpiece, in the company of experts, to try to find an answer...

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Phil Barker

Ever since its launch in 1954, the Fender Stratocaster has been, at once, the most recognisable electric in the world and the most mercurial. While Telecasters tend to deliver a somewhat familiar ride every time you pick one up, when you try a Strat for the first time it's harder to predict whether it will be light, pristine and bright – or dark, warm and gutsy. That's partly because, beneath the skin, the model has changed like a chameleon through the different phases in its evolution.

With the model's eighth decade in production just around the corner, we began thinking about whether it's possible to crown a particular point in the Strat's storied life where it had reached perfection, the peak of its evolution as a design. A point before which everything was a work in progress – and after which everything was merely a variation on a theme. To help us answer this slippery question, we enlisted the help of some true Strat aficionados to try to identify the point at which the model reached its apex – if that exists in any meaningful sense – while gaining fresh insights into this timeless design.

Since we ran a detailed comparison between vintage guitars and their Custom Shop counterparts back in issue 443, we're going to exclude reissues from the reckoning, since they are essentially just modified copies of the original kit. If modern Strat tone is your thing, you'll find guides to contemporary visions of Fender's Strat elsewhere in this feature. Here, however, we're going to look at the seminal early decades of the Strat's evolution and see if we can chart where the original seed of Strat design reached its zenith.

IN THE BEGINNING

When considering any classic model of guitar, there's usually special reverence for the first of the breed – be it a 1950 Broadcaster or a 1952 Gibson Les Paul Model. But while such guitars are undoubtedly historic, it's also fair to say that rarely do they represent a fully mature design. The Les Paul, for example, would take half a decade to reach the archetypal maple/mahogany, twin-humbucker format that continues to the present, and even then it took until the 1980s for Gibson to stop tinkering with those fundamentals.

To an extent, the same could be said of the Strat in 1954. The ash-body, two-tone sunburst model that Fender debuted is undoubtedly a historic design. But it isn't fully representative of what the Strat was to become, as Mike Long, owner of vintage guitar specialist ATB Guitars, argues.

"'54s are a breed apart," Mike reflects. "I mean, it's not just that – it's what *month* in '54 a particular guitar was made as well, it's that anal. Because they vary quite significantly, in small details, from the very early '54s, to the mid-'54 examples to the late '54s. Generally, 1954 Strats tend to sell for an awful lot more money [than other years] and they're very desirable. But I personally don't think they're the best Strats. We've had a few '54s; they're good, but I think they have more appeal to the collector, rather than the player."

Guitarist contributor and vintage restoration expert Huw Price agrees, arguing that many features that initially appeared on 1954 Strats were abandoned in the months that followed the model's launch.

PHOTO BY JOHN RODGERS/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

FOAM GREEN 1963 FENDER STRATOCASTER

"This guitar came in from New Zealand," says collector Andrew Raymond. "That was in 2004 or 2005 and I've had it ever since. I pounced on it because it's such an unusual colour. I'd never seen one up until that point and I haven't seen another Foam Green Strat since – I'm sure there are some around, probably in the States, but it's such an unusual colour because [60s guitar-buyers] preferred blues and reds and not those sorts of finishes. But it has been played, which you can see when you examine it."

Andrew says the Foam Green finish was applied in the factory over a previous sunburst finish, a not-uncommon phenomenon with custom colour Fenders.

"Fender didn't like wasting anything," Andrew says. "So if there was a flaw in, say, a sunburst finish, they wouldn't say, 'Let's do it again.' I think it was more likely they were thinking, 'We don't like custom colours because they're a pain for the production process – but if we've got to do them, put them over a [rejected] sunburst finish because it'll hide a flaw and then we can sell the guitar." So, to the best of my knowledge, that's how it came about."

1. This 1963 Strat is deceptively rare as Foam Green has since become a popular colour for reissues

2. Abrasion wear on the lower horn reveals the Foam Green was sprayed over sunburst

"The 1954 Strats that I've played had quite bulbous necks. They didn't seem as refined as the Telecasters from that era, in terms of the playing feel," Huw tells us. "And with the early '54s, they hadn't really settled the pickup design, either. I think they were using Alnico III magnets and they also had wider slugs as well. So the pickups were still a work in progress. The very earliest ones supposedly had 100k control pots, too," he says, explaining why 1954 Strats can sound quite different from what we might expect of Strats today.

> "1957 is probably the most popular year for maple necks, mainly because of the V profile. [The neck of] Clapton's Blackie was a '57"
>
> *MIKE LONG*

Andrew Raymond, owner of Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars in Bath, argues that it didn't take long for Fender to respond to customer feedback and rejig the specs into something that feels like the first truly classic Strat – around a year, by his reckoning.

"'54s are sort of on their own, really, because they're more or less prototypes in a way, and the necks aren't that nice on them – very round," Andrew says. "But 1955 is a great year, I think. When Joe Bonamassa played my 'Grainger' 'Burst at Cardiff seven years ago, I looked at his guitar rack and I saw a '55 Strat and said, 'Can I have a go?' and he said, 'Yeah, no problem.' Playing it, I thought, 'This neck is fantastic.'

3. Buddy Holly was the original 50s Strat hero and one of the first big stars to use one, acquiring his first in 1955. Early Strats can play and sound a little unfamiliar in modern hands

However, Huw Price sounds a note of caution regarding the playability of fully original mid-50s Fenders.

"It's important to realise that the frets on a lot of early Fenders, probably up to about '56, can be absolutely tiny. Really low, narrow frets, that are not really conducive to anything like the playing that most of us have been doing since the late 50s."

Hence, most of the mid-50s Strats in use with top musicians today have been refretted to suit modern playing styles at some point. All considered, while the earlier 50s Strats remain rightly significant and sought after as historic instruments, we probably need to keep walking along the path of Strat evolution to find the peak.

THE LATE 50s

The most obvious feature of 50s Strats, their all-maple necks, lasted until nearly the end of the decade. And some believe that the last of the maple-necked Strats still represent an all-time high-water mark in Strat design.

"1957 is probably the most popular year for maple necks, mainly because of the V profile," says Mike Long of the model's enduring appeal. "Also, [the neck of] Clapton's Blackie was a '57," he adds.

In some ways (the Clapton factor notwithstanding), the classic status of '57 Strats is a bit surprising as they also feature that most 'Marmite' of neck profiles. Andrew Raymond says he's become a fan of the '57's vintage V neck profile over time, but it wasn't immediately comfortable.

4

SUNBURST
1959 FENDER STRATOCASTER

"This is an all-original 1959 Stratocaster," Mike Long of ATB says. "It's one of the last of the maple necks. Most '59s you'll see will probably have a rosewood 'board. So this would be one of the last of the maple-necks to leave Fullerton in '59 before they went over to the slab rosewood. This particular guitar is all straight: original frets, original hardware, electronics, and in a really nice condition in an original tweed case."

4. Strats such as the maple-neck 1959 example (left) represent so-called 'transitional' guitars with some features from the model's immediate past but others that were entirely new. This particular guitar sounded and played amazingly well when we examined it

"Fender didn't like wasting anything, so [for custom colours] they would rather put them over a rejected sunburst finish to hide a flaw"

Andrew Raymond

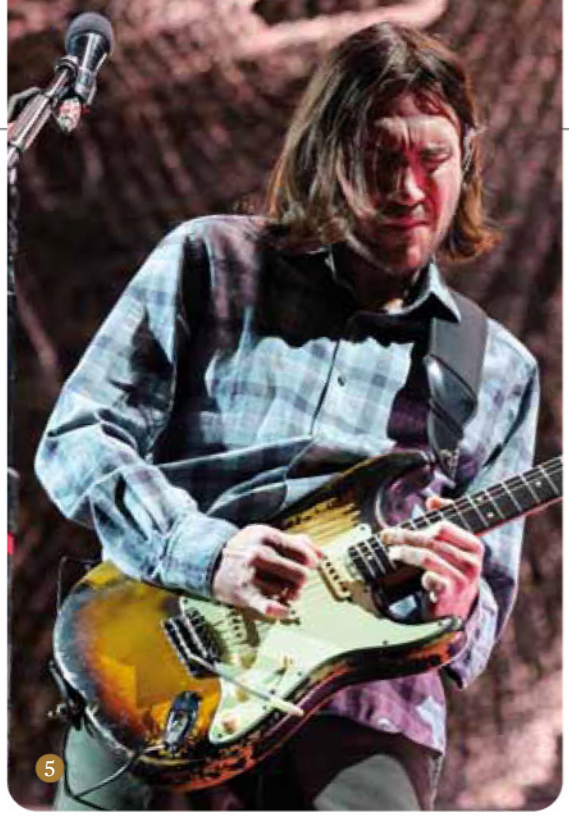


PHOTO BY ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES

5. John Frusciante of the Red Hot Chili Peppers is a well-known exponent of the early 60s Strat. Such star associations keep the mystique of guitars built between 1961 and 1964 strong

"It took a lot of getting used to, but now I love it," he says. "But by '58 and '59 Fender went to more of a rounded neck instead."

Huw Price says that whatever the neck profile, Fender was putting a lot of effort into making Strats as beautifully contoured and ergonomic as possible at that time.

"If you look at the Strats of that period, the bodies are so sculpted and the contours are so finely carved," says Huw. "The tummy tuck at the top edge is just so thin compared with earlier and later bodies. Similarly, the arm chamfer comes down *so* far. So those Strats often have very, very heavily sculpted bodies that are just beautiful to behold."

Huw also points to another big spec change that occurred during this period – a change that arguably marks the point at which the Strat transformed from a dainty, sparkling clean machine to a guitar capable of hitting harder.

> "A lot of people chase that great big, fat, powerful Strat tone… something you tend to find with the guitars from 1962 to '64"
>
> *HUW PRICE*

"By 1957 or actually late 1956 Fender made the transition to alder bodies. The Strat bodies prior to that were built of ash and it does have a different tone. I think a lot of people would perhaps prefer the alder bodies because it just seems to have a little bit more midrange, a little bit more heft to it. When you combine alder with a maple neck and the slightly weaker pickups of the time, it all seems to gel together really nicely. By comparison, weak pickups with ash can sound really sparkly and beautiful and clear – but may not have the kind of the weight or body [to the sound] that a lot of players prefer in a Stratocaster."

THE ROSEWOOD ERA

By 1959, the era of the maple neck was (for the time being) drawing to a close. The nitro surface of maple necks wore through too easily and, while today's Relic fans may love that look, Fender likely wanted a more upmarket, durable look for the Strat. Thus, the now classic combination of rosewood fretboard and alder body was adopted, marking the start of what many today consider the peak period of pre-CBS Strat design. The Strats of this era are so popular, in fact, that the exact year when the Strat hit its 60s best is still keenly debated.

"1962 is a very popular year. Not sure why, but often if you've got a '60, '61 and a '62 Strat on the market, then people will tend to go for the '62," says Mike Long of ATB Guitars. "1963 is also a very, very popular year. A lot of people say '63 was the year when all the stars aligned at Fullerton and they got the perfect Strat in terms of the pickups, in terms of the neck profile and in terms of the sound. And then from '64 onwards, it started to go downhill a little bit.

"A lot of people want a '63 Strat – so many people play them and the image of a beat-up 63 Strat is so cool. A perfectly mint '63 Strat maybe isn't quite so sought after, but a '63 Strat that is a little bit beat up is a very desirable thing that people want. So I'd say '63 is the most popular."

Needless to say, the relative merits of spec changes made to the Strat during this period inspire a lot of debate, especially the difference between the thicker rosewood fingerboards of the earlier 'slab-'board' rosewood Strats versus the thinner, round-laminate 'veneer 'boards' that Fender adopted in August of 1962. Huw Price argues that the difference between them has to be considered in context of other changes being made to the Strat at that time.

"It's difficult when you start making assumptions about what impact slab 'boards or veneer 'boards have on tone because, at the same time, the [neck] profiles were also changing," Huw explains. "So in 1960 to '61 Fender was making really quite skinny necks, just as Gibson was going really skinny at that kind of '61/'62 era before fattening up again in the mid-60s.

"Personally, I like the veneer rosewood Strats best," he adds. "I associate those guitars with a slightly fuller, warmer, fatter tone. But whether it's attributable to the 'board or other factors, I don't know, because around about '62 Fender was also changing the pickup design again – they changed the polepiece diameter, which became smaller, and that meant they could get more windings on the coil. So the pickups got a little bit darker and more powerful... I think a lot of people are chasing what they perceive as that great big, fat, powerful Strat tone. And to my ears, that's something you tend to find more with the guitars from 1962 to '64."

PHOTO BY PAUL NAYLOR/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

6. Hank Marvin of The Shadows was an incredibly influential player for a whole generation of British guitarists. His iconic Fiesta Red Strat spawned, as guitar folklore has it, a cottage industry devoted to refinishing imported Strats in that popular shade of red

7

FIESTA RED
1962 FENDER STRATOCASTER

"This one I bought recently from the original owner's daughter in Newcastle," Mike Long of ATB Guitars says. "So it's an original Fiesta Red, it's not a Selmer refin like so many of them were. And one of the cool things about this guitar is it's Fiesta Red over Dakota Red, over Coral Pink, over Desert Sand. So Fender were probably glad when this one finally left the factory gates. But it was not uncommon for Fender to spray custom finishes over different colours."

7. Rarely has a finish been so desired and yet had such a convoluted history as Fiesta Red, which was itself a logical extension from lesser-known finishes that Fender trialled in the 50s such as Mandan Red, Roman Red and Fullerton Red. Ranging from a milky, pinkish colour to a hottish, almost orange tone, Fiesta's hue has wandered about quite a lot over the years

"Around '62 Fender changed the polepiece diameter, meaning they could get more windings on the coil. So the pickups got a little bit darker and more powerful"

Huw Price

PHOTO BY VAL WILMER/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

8. While early 60s Strats may remain the purist's favourite, CBS-era Strats powered much of Hendrix's career and sounded great – though Jimi and tech Roger Mayer fettled them a lot

9. Glimpses of the distinctively streaked grain of korina can be seen through chips and worn areas in this 1964 Strat's Olympic White finish

POST-CBS & BEYOND

It's an article of faith among some Strat aficionados that the instruments made before the CBS Corporation bought Fender in January 1965 are the best – and there is (with caveats) a sizeable grain of truth in that. But opinions on that score are changing; Andrew Raymond says the reputation and value of some post-CBS Strats have risen in recent years.

"When I started collecting 30 years ago, the cut-off [for desirability] was 1965. Small headstock with a transition logo, maybe. Anything after that, forget it. Well, that's all changed completely in the last 30 years. Particularly white Strats from 1968 – the Hendrix Strat – those go for fairly serious money. But the quality *was* different in that period. I mean, we've had a few and Huw Price is actually [servicing and setting one up] for us at the minute, which is a '69 – a really cool guitar and it plays great. Okay, it's not quite the same as an early 60s Strat, but it's still a really cool Strat. So, over a period of time, people's perceptions and people's ideas and people's opinions have changed. To take that a bit further, when I started collecting, people wouldn't touch a 70s Strat with a bargepole. Now that's different: early 70s Strats are going for reasonable amounts of money. So I think it's the whole period thing, but that period now is getting extended."

> "When I started collecting 30 years ago, the cut-off [for desirability] was 1965… that's all changed completely in the last three decades"
>
> *ANDREW RAYMOND*

Mike Long of ATB Guitars concurs, adding that it's not true to say that Strats made in the (CBS-owned) decade between 1965 and 1975 are all duds – and it's now widely accepted that such instruments often sound great and offer relatively good bang for your buck, should you be fortunate enough to be in a position to buy vintage.

"I think '65s are good value for money at the moment and they can be really good," Mike says, "especially if you get an early '65. I'd agree with that. But from '75 onwards, you start getting into quite dark waters. And by the time we get to the very late 70s, to be honest, they're often pretty bad and usually very heavy as well."

That opinion was borne out by our experience in the recent 'Super 70s' issue of *Guitarist* (498) in which we interviewed guitarist Aynsley Lister about his working collection of early-to-mid-70s Strats, which sounded incredible in his hands and lacked nothing as modern blues-rock tools. However, Huw Price says that you need to be aware of some key changes that Fender made to the Strat during the first decade of CBS ownership if you're to understand the tonal character of these guitars.

"I think there are a couple of watershed changes that Fender made," Huw says. "I think the first thing is that they changed the pickup magnet wire from heavy Formvar to plain enamel, which gives a somewhat different tone. So that's a big deal."

Mike Long of ATB agrees, saying: "I, and a lot of people who I speak to, favour the original black-bottom pre-CBS pickups with the Formvar wiring, before they change over to enamel. Those classic pickups from about '55 through to early '64 are fantastic. I think they're unbeatable."

But Huw Price adds that the later plain enamel pickups worked to better advantage when the Strat's traditional bridge design changed to a new format.

"Essentially, the bridge assembly remained unchanged through until the late 60s and early 70s – pressed steel saddles with steel blocks, which were joined to the bridge plate with screws," says Huw. "I mean, nothing really changed. But I think it's interesting that they were putting less magnet wire onto the pickups by the 70s, which made them cooler and presumably saved a little bit of money, too. The resulting pickups tended to sound brighter and glassier, and, in conjunction with steel blocks and steel saddles, they can give a Stratocaster quite a metallic tone. So that isn't necessarily the best combination for some people.

OLYMPIC WHITE
1964 KORINA STRAT

"They did a run of korina-body Strats in late '63 through early '64," Mike Long of ATB says of this ultra-rare variant of the mid-60s Strat. "They are usually from the same serial number range with the same pot codes and everything. And this is one of those. This was originally sold to South Africa and it's been with one owner from new. They do sound different to normal Strats – there's more sustain on a korina body and it's a denser sound as well. They're very rare. There's probably only a handful made and I have seen them sell for over £100,000."

10. While ash is still rightly regarded as a classic body material for Strats, alder arguably proved a better all-round tonal fit for the driven sounds of the rock era. Ultra-rare variants such as korina-bodied Strats hint at other directions Fender might have gone in – in fact, some of the earliest prototypes of the Strat, all the way back in 1954, trialled spruce bodies

"I think '65s are good value for money at the moment, especially an early '65. But from '75 onwards, you start getting into quite dark waters"

Mike Long

11. Rory Gallagher's unmistakable and stellar-sounding 1961 Strat provided the inspiration for our choice of 'ultimate' Strat. What would yours be?

"Then in the early 70s, Fender went to a one-piece bridge," Huw continues. "I don't know what the block was made of – zinc or something like that – but, at the same time, they also went to Mazak [also known as zamak] saddles, which have a very different tone. People derided Mazak as 'monkey metal', but it's exactly the same stuff that all those ABR-1 bridges and tailpieces were made from at Gibson [in the 50s]. And Mazak has a really, really nice woody smooth tone, which arguably attenuates the top-end a little bit, which in combination with bright, underwound pickups can be a good thing."

CONCLUSION

Our trawl through Strat history with the experts was illuminating, but you can't escape the feeling that, as far as individual taste goes, there can be no one 'ultimate' Strat because each player has different ears, hands and needs and so each person's notion of the 'perfect' Strat is inevitably different.

> "If you're looking for a bargain pre-CBS Strat, look for a '58 because they're not as popular as '57 Strats… But they sound the same"
>
> *MIKE LONG*

However, what is clear is that some historic versions of the Strat offer modern players a more relevant, all-round useful playing experience than others. Thus we can name 1970 to 1974 as a fertile period in which to find good-sounding, later-era vintage Strats. We can also name 1960 to 1964 as a particularly strong era in which to find punchy, midrange-rich Strats that perform incredibly well for the modern rock and blues player. And, going back a couple of years further, many would find the alder-bodied late-50s Strats just as compelling, if a little more springy and sprightly in character. Such guitars can also lay claim to being the most beautiful of all Strats, due to the amount of time lavished on sculpting and sanding their contours – a level of detailing unlikely to be found on reissues. Some purely aesthetic factors have also shaped which years of production are today regarded as classics.

"1958 Strats don't tend to be that popular," Mike Long says. "Now, there's no difference in sound between '57 and a '58. The only differences are neck feel and the fact that 1958 was the first year of the three-tone sunburst – in that particular year, the sunburst was sprayed using a red that generally lasted the course of time. Whereas from 1959 through to late '61, they used a different red in the three-tone sunburst that faded very quickly [which people tend to prefer today]. So if you're looking for a bargain in pre-CBS Strats, you should probably look for a '58 because they're not as popular as '57 Strats. The unfaded finish makes them less desirable than both the two-tones that went before or the later three-tones that faded over time. And they've got a C-shaped neck rather than a V-shaped one. So they're considered not as desirable as other ones, and hence prices aren't up there. But they sound exactly the same."

So, given all the variables outlined above, can we really identify an apex moment from the Strat's history? As we've seen, so many aspects of our appreciation of the Strat hinge on subjective factors. But we can probably identify a year that combines an optimum combination of woods, good pickups and high build quality. Hence, we'd humbly suggest 1961 as our peak year.

Why? Well, firstly you have a slab rosewood 'board and, all things considered, we'd choose that over a veneer 'board if only because its potential to be refretted without damaging the maple beneath is higher than with the thinner veneer 'boards. Necks were slim in '61, ensuring slinky playability, and as far as pickups go, no-one has ever suggested Rory Gallagher's '61 sounds bad, to say the least. Also, after 1960, you have access to the finishes found on Fender's first custom colour chart, from Olympic White to Foam Green, while the elegant contours of the body itself hadn't yet become as squat and burly as they became in the latter half of the 60s. And given that half the world wants a '62 or a '63, we can't help liking a '61 Strat for being a breed just slightly apart.

Finally, we're tempted to introduce a final curveball feature to our 'ultimate' Strat: a hardtail. So many players, from Bonamassa to Robert Cray, rate the Tele-like resonance and clarity a hardtail Strat can offer, as Huw price observes.

"Bonamassa's hardtail '55 is his favourite – he calls it the best Strat in the world," says Huw. "And I have played that one. And Billy Gibbons, of course, has been using that hardtail Strat of his since the beginning, on tracks like *La Grange* – it's a combination of Pearly Gates and his hardtail Strat. A hardtail Strat is taking you back more towards that Telecaster kind of approach."

Are the alleged tonal benefits of going hardtail worth the loss of the whammy bar and all the shimmer and shake that's such a hallmark of the Strat sound? Well, best argue *that* one out among yourselves... G

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STRAT'S LIFE

With more than 80 current Stratocasters in the Fender line-up, there's a genuine Strat for everyone – here are six that stand out

Words Stuart Williams

FENDER VINTERA '60S STRATOCASTER MODIFIED £1,009

If vintage feel combined with modern features at a more affordable price is what you're looking for, the Vintera '60s Stratocaster Modified puts it all in one guitar. It has a retro look with a choice of the pictured Burgundy Mist Metallic finish or Olympic White, and the 21 medium-jumbo frets on the pau ferro 'board lean towards the classic, but the magnets are Hot '60s Strat models wired to an S-1 switch. There's a two-point contemporary vibrato and the neck is finished in a sweat-friendly satin.
www.fender.com

FENDER AMERICAN PERFORMER STRATOCASTER £1,249

With an alder body, 241mm (9.5-inch) fingerboard radius and the classic three-single-coil configuration, it's so far, so Strat. But it's the controls that hold the magic. First up, those pickups are Yosemites, which have been calibrated for a completely even volume match between the positions. You can bring the neck pickup in using the push-pull pot for combos that a regular five-way can't reach, and it has Fender's Greasebucket circuit for removing brightness without losing gain or adding mud on the bridge pickup.
www.fender.com

FENDER AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL II STRATOCASTER £1,769

The American Professional II series boasts a long spec sheet, bringing some additional features and modern touches to a US-made 'workhorse' price tag. There's a choice of alder or lighter-weight roasted pine for the body, with maple or rosewood fingerboards (with rolled edges), and a rounded heel/neckplate for upper-fret comfort. Electronics are Fender's V-Mod II pickups, individually voiced per position and they're given a versatility boost thanks to a push-pull pot that engages the neck pickup in positions 1 and 2. Crikey!
www.fender.com

FENDER AMERICAN VINTAGE II 1961 STRATOCASTER £2,179

The Loake's brogue to the American Ultra's Nike Air, this 60s-inspired Strat has all the classic appointments that a vintage fan is after. Starting with an alder body, available in three vintage-approved nitro finishes (Olympic White, 3-Color Sunburst and Fiesta Red), it continues to the 184mm (7.25-inch) radius rosewood fingerboard (with clay dot inlays). The hardware is 'vintage-accurate', too, and the Pure Vintage pickups are designed to look and sound like they came out of a Fullerton parts drawer.
www.fender.com

FENDER AMERICAN ULTRA STRATOCASTER £2,259

The outline is familiar, but there's a lot going on with this model, the most contemporary iteration of Fender's show pony. The pickups are a trio of hum-killing Ultra Noiseless Vintage single coils and they're wired to an S-1 switch that allows you to introduce the neck pickup at any position, plus there's a treble-bleed circuit, too. Pair this with a Modern D-shaped neck, compound radius (254mm to 355.6mm/10- to 14-inch) fingerboard, contoured heel and a range of eye-catching finishes, and you've got a Strat tailored for 'now'.
www.fender.com

FENDER STEVIE RAY VAUGHAN STRATOCASTER £2,349

Ask 10 guitarists for their favourite Strat player and you'll likely get 20 answers. But Stevie Ray Vaughan remains a Strat GOAT for many. Fender's replica pays tribute to his 'Number One', decked-out with gold hardware (including the upside-down vibrato) and the distinctive engraved scratchplate. The maple neck is a fat, oval fistful and its pau ferro fingerboard features suitably jumbo 6105 frets. A trio of Texas Special single coils completes the sound, taking you from low 'n' slow to scorching.
www.fender.com

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VINTAGE ICON

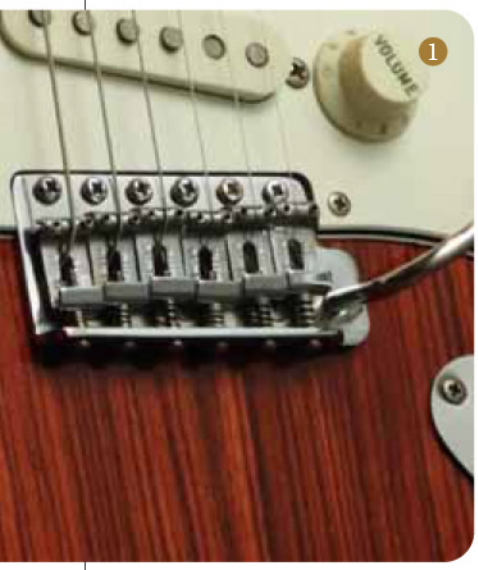
David Davidson of Well Strung Guitars talks us through an experimental *1967 Semi-Hollow Fender Stratocaster Prototype* from Fender's R&D department made with zebrawood

Words Rod Brakes **Photography** Paige Davidson

"The CBS era [from 1965] was a hugely experimental time for Fender because they had the financial resources to try a lot of different things. They'd already hired Roger Rossmeisl [in 1962] and Phil Kubicki [in 1964] to come onboard and develop new designs. The guitar world was changing quickly and people didn't necessarily want the same old same old. But the biggest problem they were facing was weight. From my understanding, the Environmental Protection Agency in the United States made it mandatory to use the entire tree, as companies that were harvesting wood were taking the wood furthest from the roots and leaving the rest of the limbless tree to die. So that heavier wood down at the base had to be used in the process, and that prompted Fender to find ways of using less of it. Essentially, they wanted to figure out how to reduce the weight of guitars but still make them sound good.

"Obviously, there was a lot of experimentation with Telecasters – including the 'smuggler' and Thinline Telecasters – but I've also come across experimental models like a semi-hollow Jaguar that was made like a Custom Telecaster with a bound body. But the only commercially successful design out of all those weight-relieved guitars was the Thinline Telecaster. It was the number-one-selling Fender guitar in 1968 and 1969. They sold more Thinline Telecasters than they did any other guitar.

"I don't have the history on exactly why this prototype Stratocaster was made, but my feeling is it was put together for a trade show. I think Fender wanted to test the water with it. It has a bound rosewood neck with block inlays and a bound top and back with sides – a multi-piece construction, as opposed to a contoured solid body. There's a block inside to support the vibrato unit. Being made of zebrawood makes it even more interesting. I think it was one of these totally experimental guitars, a complete one of one.



1. While this prototype guitar features a thinline construction, the vibrato system is internally housed in a solid block of wood

2. Experimental appointments include a bound top and back, meaning this guitar forgoes the Strat's "original contour body"

"This is a cool guitar that highlights a particularly experimental time at Fender, starting in 1967 and continuing up to 1972. Around that time, they were constantly trying new things. Roger Rossmeisl's colleague Philip Kubicki was also making a lot of decisions about what they were going to make and what they weren't going to make. He was really heading up a lot of special projects. I was lucky enough to know him when he was making his basses. It was really important for me to ask him every question I could about Fender. But most of the time he didn't really want to talk about it. At that point, he was preoccupied with his own company. But he talked about doing the LTD and Montego electric hollowbodies. I think he really believed in the vision – that Fender should be doing more hollow and semi-hollow electric models. But not everything worked out.

"Later on, Fender Japan were revisiting the more experimental designs, and they did issues of this prototype semi-hollow Strat that you see here. They're reasonable facsimiles. But they're not exactly the same. From the 80s onwards, Fender Japan was finding guitars and making copies of unusual instruments. They did some limited runs and one-offs as well as the more standard designs. Fender Japan did so much interesting stuff, like the Paisley Red and Blue Flower Telecaster reissues, and the Rosewood Telecaster. But Fender in the USA – at the time – was more interested in moving forward with new things. Fender Japan was something of a test market. But I remember selling the Japanese Paisley, Flower and Rosewood Teles when they first came out. I mean, it was a really big deal. People were very excited about them, and they are actually very good guitars.

"If CBS Fender could have figured out that they didn't have to put a bolt-on neck on everything, I think the LTD and Montego would have been successful. The materials are some of the finest I've ever seen and were on par with anyone else's. And their pickups were fantastic at the time. Fender had the ability to do anything. They just couldn't get past that one cost-cutting measure of the bolt-on neck. I think if they'd have done a set-neck LTD or Montego they would have been successful. I think they would have been able to get some notable players to use them and they would have gained some popularity.

"They spent a tremendous amount of money developing things such as the Micro-Tilt system, but they couldn't get to the purists. And that's the problem: the jazz purists thought Fender guitars were toys and that's always the way it was. Look at the Jazzmaster. Fender was just lucky enough to have a sound you couldn't produce from a Les Paul. Otherwise, they would have failed." G

Vintage guitar veteran David Davidson owns Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York
www.wellstrungguitars.com /
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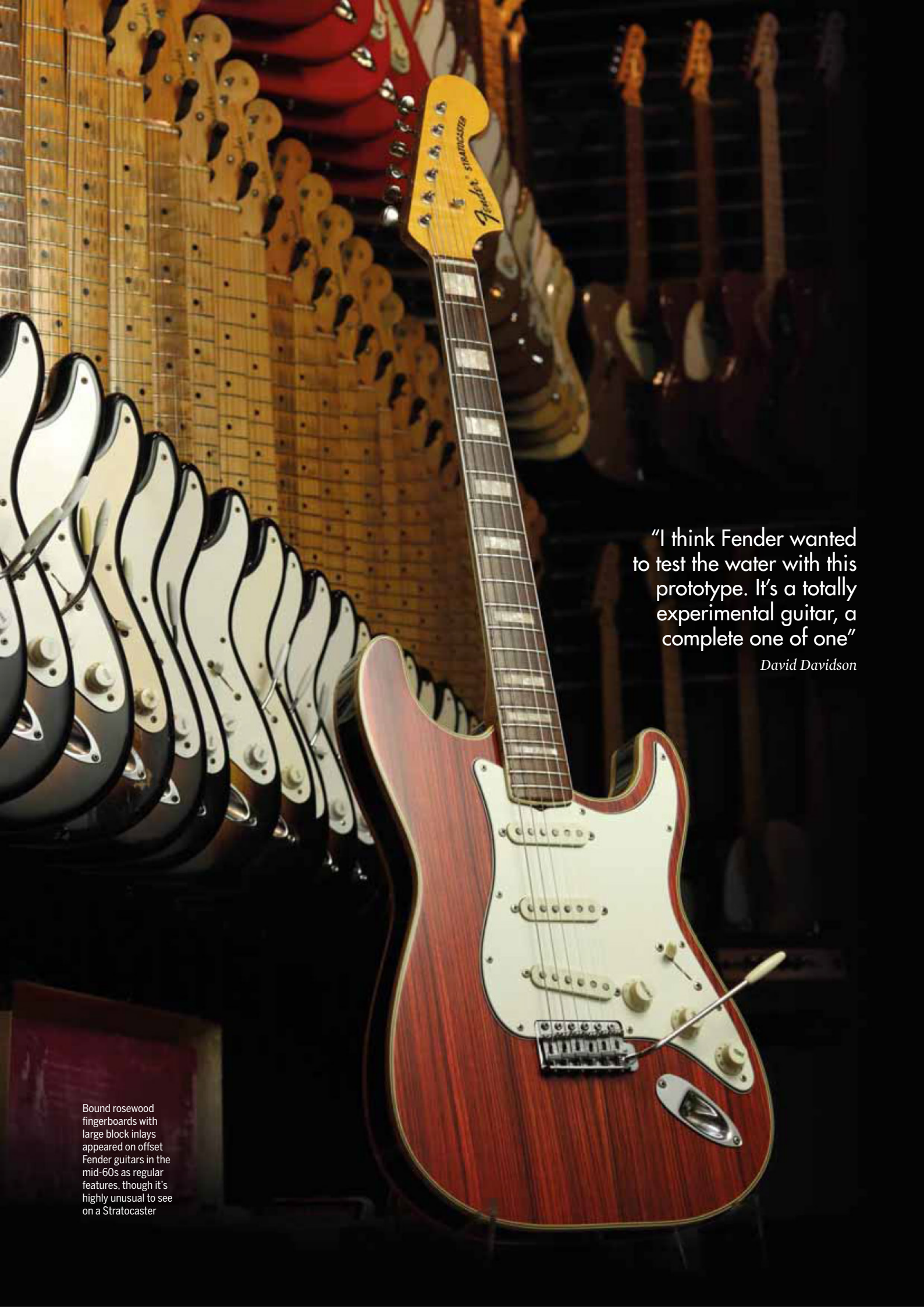


"I think Fender wanted to test the water with this prototype. It's a totally experimental guitar, a complete one of one"

David Davidson

Bound rosewood fingerboards with large block inlays appeared on offset Fender guitars in the mid-60s as regular features, though it's highly unusual to see on a Stratocaster

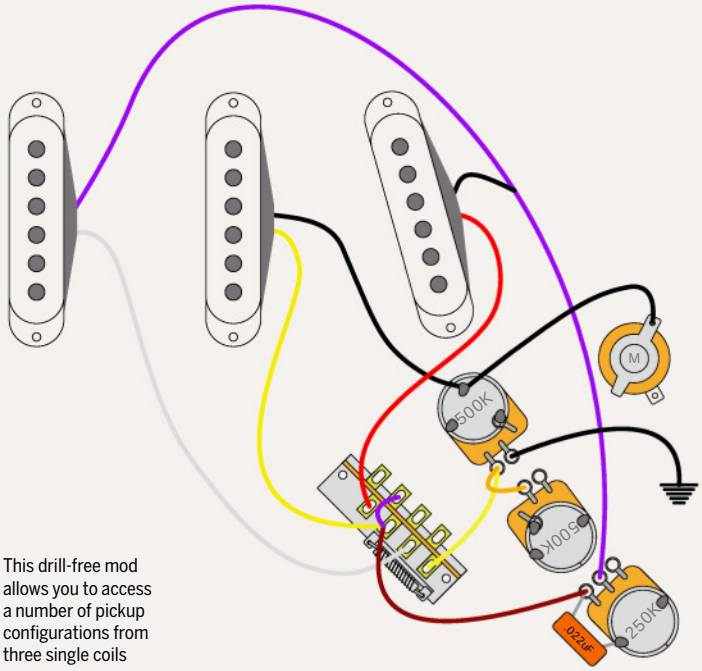
STRAT MODS

From subtle upgrades to SuperStrats and full-on Frankenstrats, Fender's finest has always been the ideal candidate for guitar modding. Here, we offer up 15 tone and maintenance tips

Words Huw Price

1 DAN ARMSTRONG WIRING

If you need a 'Swiss Army knife' guitar, but you don't want to rout your Strat for humbuckers or drill holes in your pickguard, check out Dan Armstrong's wiring mod. It connects all three pickups to the neck tone control to free up the middle tone control, which then becomes a parallel/series fader. In short, with the control at 10, you have five regular SSS combinations. Set to 1, you get a HSH configuration, with the neck and bridge pickups operating in series with the middle pickup for pseudo humbucker tones.



This drill-free mod allows you to access a number of pickup configurations from three single coils

2 INDUCTANCE PLATING

If you crave a bit more beef and output from your bridge pickup, try installing a steel inductance plate. Various pickup makers can supply them or fit one for you. Minimal soldering is required and it's a completely reversible modification. Some players like the effect so much, they use inductance plates under their middle and neck pickups, too.

3 BLOCKING OFF

To disable a vibrato, loosen the strings and tighten the spring claw screws until the front of the plate touches the body. Take a piece of wood just wide enough to tap in between the block and the rear of the vibrato rout. Loosen the spring claw screws slightly to wedge it in place, reset the action and intonation and you're done. Before replacing the spring cover, listen to your guitar because some believe Strats sound better without them.

4 BRIDGE TONE

Stratocaster bridge pickups tend to sound disproportionately bright because they don't bleed treble through a tone control. Before investing in a 'balanced' set of replacement pickups, try swapping the middle pickup's tone control to the bridge pickup or placing a jumper wire on the switch so the bridge and middle pickups share the same tone control. Or the neck and middle can share, it's up to you.

5 CURING STRAT-ITUS

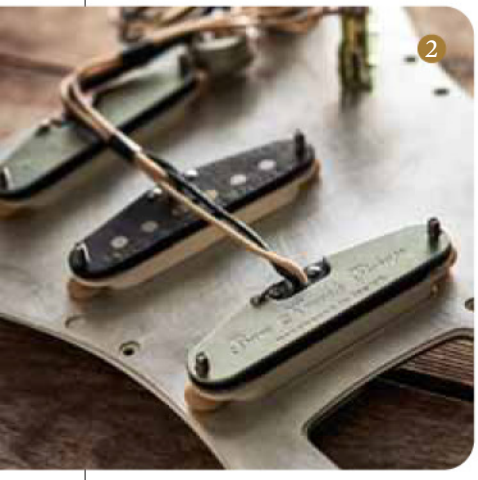
Ever notice how the low E string sounds honky and out of tune as you play higher up the neck? Dubbed 'Strat-itus', it's caused by the magnetic pull of the pickups inhibiting string vibration because they're set too close to the strings. The only cure is to back them off until the effect becomes acceptable or disappears completely, and it's also why pro luthiers often lower the pickups when setting intonation.

6 VIBRATO TUNING

Everyone has their own preferences for vibrato setups, from blocked off to down only or fully floating. If you like to pull up as well as dive down, you can follow Carl Verheyen's advice and balance the string and spring tension so the G string pulls up a minor 3rd and the B and top E by a semitone. It makes chord shimmers sound very musical and, with a bit of to-and-fro, it's easy enough to dial in.

7 SWINGING ARMS

Vibrato arms can loosen up with use, which makes them feel less responsive and accurate. To tighten them up, try wrapping some PTFE tape around the threaded end. You can find it in the plumbing section of DIY stores. Alternatively, if you drop a small spring into the vibrato block it will press up against the arm and make it feel tighter and more stable.



2. An inductance plate increases the output of your bridge pickup – a technique used on Bare Knuckle's Triptych set

3. A vibrato-loaded Strat can be 'blocked off' with a piece of wood that's wedged in appropriately

8 PUSH-PUSH SWITCHING

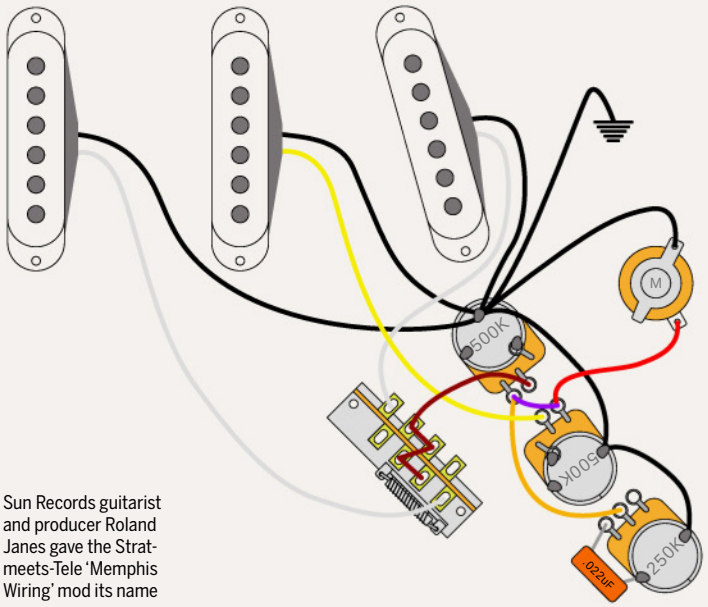
Unlike knurled Tele knobs, tapered Strat knobs are harder to grip and this makes push-pull switches harder to use. Instead, consider push-push switches because you only need to tap the top of the knob to make it pop up or press down. They're ideal for installing custom wiring by stealth, with no need to rout the body or drill the pickguard for toggle switches.

10. A lack of friction is your friend when it comes to tuning, and there are various ways to lube the nut slots

11. Pay attention to your stringing technique – it can prevent string buzz behind the nut

9 MEMPHIS WIRING

This early Stratocaster wiring mod became popular with Strat players who also wanted a Telecaster-style in-between tone. The middle pickup is disconnected from the switch and main volume control, and the three-way switch combines with the volume and tone controls to operate just like a Telecaster. The second tone control becomes the middle volume control so you still have all the regular Strat settings, plus all three pickups in parallel. It's called 'Memphis Wiring' because it was preferred by Sun Records legend Roland Janes.



Sun Records guitarist and producer Roland Janes gave the Strat-meets-Tele 'Memphis Wiring' mod its name

10 STICKING POINTS

The main difference between Strats that hold tuning and those that don't is friction, and the nut is usually to blame. A bit of lubrication in the nut slots can keep things running smoothly. Try using graphite from a soft pencil, Chapstick or a tiny dab of silicon grease, or specialist products such as Big Bends Nut Sauce and Music Nomad Tune-It. While you're at it, try a dab or two under the string tree and on the saddles. Also consider Wudtone's subtly re-engineered vibrato assemblies and bridge plates for friction-free vibrato and enhanced response (www.wudtone.com).

11 STRINGING DOWN

Fender's neck design provides relatively little break angle over the nut, which is why one or two string trees are needed to sharpen the angle and eliminate string vibration behind the nut. Since non-roller string trees can be friction points, the alternative is to modify your stringing technique. Rather than cut the strings short, leave sufficient length to wrap the D and G strings around the tuner posts several times so the string takes off from the very bottom of the post.

12 JOINT VENTURES

Fender-style necks can be loose in the pocket. Sometimes it's because the pocket is too large and you can pack the gaps with veneer strips to reduce the wiggle room. Screws sometimes work loose and luthiers can plug the screw holes with dowel then re-tap. For a more permanent solution, consider having threaded inserts installed in the heel. E-Z Lok inserts are a popular choice and a firm fixing improves tone transfer and tuning stability.

13 PICKUP UPGRADES

Upgrading pickups can be the biggest bang for your buck... and the biggest waste of money. It's about making informed choices. Research the pickup specs of your favourite players and decide if you want Formvar or plain enamel wire, which grade of magnet you might prefer, and whether you need flat or staggered slugs. You can go vintage-correct or choose stacked humbuckers for noiseless single-coil tone. Or what about dropping in P-90, Gold Foil, lipstick or humbucker soundalikes? The options are endless.

14 BUZZ OFF

Stratocaster single coils will buzz and hum depending on the environment, but there are ways to quiet things down. A RWRP (reverse wire/reverse polarity) pickup in the middle position will hum-cancel but only in positions 2 and 4. Pickup and control cavities can be lined with adhesive-backed copper foil, and some players install dummy coils. But installing noiseless pickups is the only method guaranteed to silence a Strat completely.

15 SADDLE UP

You can swap Strat saddles to improve tuning stability or enhance tone, and there is no shortage of choice. In addition to vintage-style saddles, you could consider stainless steel, Tusq, brass or titanium. To minimise friction, there are roller saddles, and Graph Tech offers a String Saver saddle to prevent breakages, as well as piezo-equipped Ghost saddles for acoustic tones at the flick of a switch.

There are many different materials to look at if you're considering a saddle swap, from stainless steel and Tusq to titanium

HEAVY TRIP

Bare Knuckle MD Tim Mills on the breakthroughs and bumps in the road behind Rabea Massaad's seismic new Triptych Strat single coils

Words Henry Yates

There is nothing off-the-peg about the guitar playing of Rabea Massaad. Voluminous of hair, visionary of mindset and almost permanently viral for his jaw-dropping online videos, the FrogLeap guitarist was never likely to settle for factory-spec Strat coils. Sure enough, the search for a bolder tone led him to the door of Tim Mills, MD of Cornwall's acclaimed Bare Knuckle, and to the birth of the Triptych set that is rapidly becoming the mod of the moment.

There's quite a buzz surrounding the Triptych.
"Yeah, absolutely, it's really taken off – in part because Rabea has just brought a different angle to Strat playing and introduced a lot of players to a new way of delivering tone from a Strat they wouldn't necessarily think of. And that was very much part of the brief: to not just make another vintage-accurate set. Rabea gave me a wishlist of classic tones, but he also needed to be able to handle the modern applications he's called on to do."

What touchstones did Massaad give you?
"Having done a lot of work with him on the Silo humbucker set, I'm very familiar with where Rabea comes from in terms of tone. The remit for the Triptych was primarily the line-up of Stevie Ray Vaughan, John Mayer and Philip Sayce. Certainly, Philip and Stevie are very fierce Strat players, and then John has a slightly politer approach. The Triptych had to be able to handle heavy stuff and work with copious amounts of fuzz and various drives."

What are the defining features of the Triptych?
"It's quite unusual because I ended up using an Alnico III-powered bridge coil. A lot of people would be surprised at that because Alnico III is one of the weaker forms of Alnico. But because it doesn't have a massive amount of pull, you actually end up with quite a bit more dynamic range. Also, it allows me to push the wind a little bit harder, so I can fatten out the highs, which is something Rabea really likes. But it's a hybrid set, essentially, because we stayed with Alnico V in the middle and neck – partly to keep the brightness in those positions because he wanted a more traditional neck and middle tone so he could get those classic SRV and Sayce tones. You know, really hollow and tubular, but they also have enough output to really drive."

1. The remit of the Triptych set was to produce a flexible but fat-sounding sonic character, delivered via shrewd magnet and wire choices, distinctively staggered poles and selective use of baseplates

Tell us about your use of baseplates in the Triptych.
"Fitting baseplates to Strat coils is not a new idea, by a long shot – it's something Leo Fender tried to do literally from the outset, but I assume it was dropped on a cost basis. But adding a baseplate alters the induction because of adding more steel mass underneath the coil. It also widens the magnetic field, so it gives you more of just about all of the frequencies. A lot of people think it just adds power and bottom-end, but when you sit back and analyse it, it's actually pushing all the frequencies. Rabea settled on just having them on the bridge and neck and having the middle without a baseplate. The middle coil on a Strat can actually be quite strident, and he felt adding a baseplate would interfere too much with his in-between tones. He wanted to retain that hollow 'cluck' you get with a RWRP middle coil."

Were there changes made along the way?
"I dialled in the wind pretty much straight away because, again, I'm very familiar with Rabea so I knew where he'd want to go with this. The only real changes were exploring the baseplates, and we initially went with heavy Formvar then made a move to plain enamel. A lot of people will say there's no difference – but there is a marked difference in tone. Heavy Formvar has a bigger cross-sectional diameter, so for the same given number of turns, you actually get a bigger coil, so it produces a cleaner sound. By comparison, with plain enamel, for the same number of turns, the coil is slightly smaller, it's a little bit more focused and this is an odd word, but I'd describe it as having more 'hair'. It's kind of dirtier, but that doesn't mean it's distorted. It's a more organic tone. And once we did that, it ticked all the boxes."

How did the Triptych go from the workbench to the world?
"We nailed it down, but then Bea got so caught up in the touring cycle that we were never able to launch it. But that meant he was able to field-test the Triptych with his main Strat on various projects, recordings and tours. So when he finally had a window and we could put all the assets together for a proper launch, the Triptych had really been out in the world for a long time and we were 100 per cent happy with it. Rabea was absolutely over the moon with the final version. He put together this incredible demo track and sent it over. It was just jaw-dropping. He said, 'This is what the Triptych brought out. It brought out me...'"

What would you say to a Strat player who is considering the Triptych pickup set as a mod?
"I suppose it boils down to your application. The Triptych is not going to be for everybody. But I could put them in a Strat, hand it to a blues player and they'd be right at home. I think the feel is quite familiar. It's more what the Triptych is capable of handling. A lot of Strat coils, in the way they're wound, once you start putting on a lot of gain, they can start getting very bright. You won't find that with these. They fatten up. They get really juicy, but if you back off the volume a little, all the classic tones are in there. I'd say that a lot of Strat players would be very comfortable. But for people that have more modern applications and steer well clear of vintage Strat coils – they'll love these because you can go as heavy as you like with them."

"Rabea Massaad gave me a wishlist of classic tones, but he also needed to be able to handle the modern applications he's called on to do"

Tim Mills

In the pickups' development stages, SRV and Philip Sayce were referenced for their fiery approaches, while John Mayer represented "a slightly politer approach", says Tim

MIXED DOUBLES

While it's only a Strat if it bears the Fender/Squier family name, there are plenty of three-single-coil, double-cutaway guitars out there worthy of your attention

Words Stuart Williams

VINTAGE V6 REISSUED ELECTRIC GUITAR £429

Persuade non-players to draw a guitar and they'll draw this outline. But they won't include the American alder body, American maple neck, rosewood fingerboard or Graph Tech nut. You'll be lucky if they mention the pitch-returning, six-screw Wilkinson WCV vibrato, and we can be sure they won't talk up the Wilkinson WVS single coils. Okay, so it's very much derived rather than redesigned, but as far as S-types that'll get you to the stage on a budget are concerned, your chariot awaits.
https://vintageguitarsrus.com

MAGNETO ERIC GALES RD3 SIGNATURE £985

Forget politely suited blues licks, Eric Gales' tone is depth and aggression, and here Raw Dawg combines attitude with bling. The basswood body is decorated with gold drip from the jack socket to the mirrored scratchplate. The hardware is Gotoh and we get a rich-looking roasted maple neck, too. Magneto's own EG1 single coils do the talking – and boy, do they talk. The signature aspect is very much in force, but if you're looking for Stratitude at sensible prices, the RD3 has definitely got it.
www.magnetoguitars.com

KAUFFMANN '63 S HEAVY RELIC £2,199

Lake Placid, who? The heavy battering that this '63 S has undergone reveals the level of detail in the craft here, spinning the yarn of a vintage refin with a gorgeous Sherwood Green over an old three-tone 'burst. All of that is applied to a paulownia body – a fast-growing, lightweight hardwood used in Japanese koto construction. It's more than a looker, though, with Cream T Bolero single coils that are controlled with a master volume, tone control and a third pot for blending in the neck pickup.
www.kauffmannsguitarstore.com

PRS SILVER SKY £2,849

When John Mayer ditched his Fenders in favour of PRS, it should have come as no surprise that the resulting signature model would pay heavy homage to his previous arm candy. The Silver Sky is the Apple Store version of an S-type: slick, clean, contemporary and very, very nice. Ignore the headstock and focus instead on the tonal delights coming from the 635JM pickups, and the sum of their host. Fancy saving some cash? Look straight towards the SE Silver Sky at £979.
www.prsguitars.com

ATKIN THE FIFTY-FOUR £3,199

You'd swear it was approaching its 70th birthday, but Atkin's obeche-bodied The Fifty-Four is fresh off the shelf. While ageing isn't for everyone, when it's done this well, we love it. Old meets new with Gotoh locking vintage-style tuners and an aged Gotoh G101TS six-screw vibrato. Electronically, it's top-notch, too, with Atkin's own hand-wound pickups, CTS pots and Sprague Orange Drop caps. Old continues to meet new with a 648mm (25.5-inch) scale length but an in-between 254mm (10-inch) radius on the 'board.
https://atkinguitars.com

SUHR CLASSIC S ANTIQUE APPROX. £3,299

There's no mistaking where this guitar draws its inspiration from, but this premium vintage-vibe S-type is also met by some modern refinements. Suhr's own locking tuners and a Gotoh 510 vibrato deliver road-ready tuning stability, there's a compound radius fingerboard (maple or rosewood) fitted with stainless-steel fret wire, and key to the design are the electronics. Three Suhr V60LP single coils are run through Suhr's noise-busting SSC II (Silent Single Coil) system for pristine, buzz-free tones, even at high-gain settings.
www.suhr.com

Image courtesy of Sound Affects; find the guitar on sale at www.soundaffects.com

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JIMMY PAGE NON-REVERSE c.1968 GIBSON FIREBIRD III

A 'Bird in the hand could be worth more than you think – especially if it has a colourful history involving a Led Zeppelin drinking game. We ask vintage specialist Mike Long of ATB Guitars about the provenance of this Page-owned beauty and the buoyant market for Gibson's underloved cult hero

Words Jamie Dickson & Henry Yates **Photography** Phil Barker

When it comes to the vintage market, few rules are set in stone. Consider the curious case of the Gibson Firebird. Launched in 1963 to a general shrug of shoulders, not even high-profile exponents like Brian Jones and Blind Faith-era Eric Clapton could boost the model's sales beyond a desultory trickle.

But as Mike Long of vintage specialist ATB Guitars explains, that same outlier status now makes the Firebird an excellent lower-priced entry point for first-time collectors. But when true one-offs come to market – like this stunning non-reverse III circa 1968, with its irresistible Led Zeppelin connection – all bets are off as to what they can command as collectible instruments.

Can you tell us the story behind this Firebird and how it came to ATB Guitars?
"We were contacted by the owner to ask if we were interested in selling it and he relayed the story. The owner worked for a property development company of which John Bonham was the partner. Before John became the world's most famous drummer, he wasn't sure if things were going to work out, so he still had this company, and the owner of this guitar was his business partner. As Led Zeppelin became well known, John sold his stake and his partner bought the business out, but they remained great friends.

"This Firebird was bought by Jimmy Page from Mike Ladd's Guitar City in Memphis, Tennessee. He bought, at the same time, a purple Les Paul that he's been pictured playing. Page bought this Firebird as you see it now. It's basically a heavily modified III, with three pickups and Jaguar-style switching. It's been painted black and looks quite fetching. The pickguard has been replaced and it's got a 'Custom Made' plaque on it. The modifications were done before Page bought it, by the technician who worked for Mike Ladd's shop, Tom Keckler."

How much do you know about Page's ownership of the Firebird?
"He obviously saw it in the shop, played it, liked it and bought it. We don't know how long Page had it for. We don't know if it's been used on any recordings or concerts – I'd love to find out. But we know he was playing Spoof with John Bonham; Spoof was a drinking game that was popular in the 70s. So John Bonham won the game [and the guitar], he had it for a while then gave it to his old business partner. This story has been verified by Mike Ladd's shop. Also, Jason Bonham is aware of the guitar's history and he knows it used to belong to his dad. So it's got good provenance. And it's the first time it's surfaced in many years."

Where does this particular model sit within the Firebird pantheon?
"Because it's been refinished, the serial number was overwritten. However, because of the style of the tuners, we think it's circa '68. It's a non-reverse body. Basically, if you follow the Firebird timeline, in 1965, Gibson changed them to non-reverse. I can show you a reverse body Firebird for comparison. This is a 1964 reverse-body VII in Cherry Red [pictured over the page]. Very rare. You can immediately see the difference. That was a pretty drastic change in 1965 and it probably signalled the death knell for the already not-very-popular Firebird. Once they were changed in 1965, they only continued for a few more years – then they were dropped from the Gibson line."

In the Firebird market, how does demand vary between reverse and non?
"Reverse bodies are far more popular and desirable. To the extent that a reverse will

Modded (and faintly menacing) this non-reverse Firebird III was picked up in Memphis by Led Zep's Jimmy Page

1. This rare Cherry Red reverse-body Firebird VII shows both the beauty and the weaknesses of the original Firebird design – its lines were breathtaking but its build was complex and the styling too 'out there' for some players

2. Though the black finish is non-original it looks good and was applied before Page bought the guitar by a Memphis guitar store technician

3. Unorthodox styling touches such as this Custom Made plaque were presumably a wry nod to Gibson's official custom-order guitars of the era

4. With three P-90 pickups to contend with, it makes a degree of sense that the guitar was modded early in its life to feature a Fender Jaguar-style switching system

be worth probably three times as much. However, people like Brian Jones used to play a non-reverse, as well as a reverse. Also, Noel Gallagher was famous for using a non-reverse. I think Phil Manzanera did Firebirds the biggest favour by sporting that nice Cardinal Red VII with Roxy Music. He just looked the king of cool, didn't he?

"Because they're more affordable, Firebirds have become more popular over the last 20-odd years. People find they're still great guitars, but it's a matter of taste more than anything and whether you like the styling. I think they're a good entry point into owning classic Gibsons. They're great bargains at the moment."

Which Firebirds are the most common and which are the hardest to find?

"In terms of reverse bodies, the most common is a III. You see many more of those than any others. The I is the next most common, but you tend to get a huge price jump because the Firebird I with the single pickup is the one Eric Clapton used in Cream, so it's got that [connection].

"Then you have the VIIs, which are rare. The VII was the top of the range model with ebony 'board, gold-plated parts. Again, not very many were sold. This one is a Cherry Red – a custom colour – and I think it's the only one ever made. It's exceptionally rare. Again, with all these Firebirds, custom colours will add probably five times the price. I've seen custom-coloured VIIs going into six figures.

"With the non-reverse Firebirds, it's pretty similar. The III is the most popular, but the I is not that popular; I don't think anyone uses it. Most people will use the III or VII, with the III being the most popular."

It's interesting that the association with Clapton drives up the I's price, even though it's arguably less flexible. But it does have a beautiful simplicity.

"It does, I totally agree. The other thing with that guitar is that it's the only one

Gibson's long-serving P-90 replaced the unique humbucking pickups of the reverse models on some non-reverse variants

in the Firebird line that doesn't have a whammy bar fitted. It came from the factory with a wrapover tailpiece, whereas all the other Firebirds had some kind of whammy bar fitted."

Were custom colours for the non-reverse more prevalent than for the reverse models, just because it was later into the 60s?
"I would say it's easier to find a non-reverse in custom colours than a reverse. They do some really nice custom colours in the Firebird range, like Inverness Green or Heather Mist poly, as well as Ice Blue, I think it's called. But again, it's easier to find in a non-reverse model. Reverse-body custom colours are very rare and do tend to attract quite a premium."

What are the special considerations with artist-owned guitars? When you get into the realms of who owned what, it must become more complex.
"It's infinitely more complex, and by far the most important part is provenance. You have to make sure that [information] is solid before you start advertising 'this guitar used to belong to so-and-so'. Especially if it concerns people who are still alive because they can always come up and say, 'Oi, I didn't own that!' We once had a Marshall we advertised as 'ex-Bryan Adams'. He actually contacted us and said, 'That's not mine, I've still got it.' It transpired the amplifier wasn't used by him, but by one of the other band members. So we changed it to 'ex-Bryan Adams Band'. But he was very nice about it."

"Firebirds are a very exciting area. They have their own little foibles and they're cool guitars as well"

Can you describe what this particular Firebird III is like to play?
"It's good. It hasn't been played for quite a while. It needs a tune – but we'll do that free of charge! We've left it as John Bonham last had it. We haven't changed anything. The guy we bought it off wasn't a guitar player, so I don't really know why John Bonham gave it to him. I mean, John obviously wasn't a guitar player, either..."

Where do Firebirds sit in the market relative to other Gibsons?
"That's a good question. Firebirds have never, ever really been popular guitars. They weren't when they were originally made and, even today, they're still not massively popular. They're never number one on most players' lists.

"Most players will look for a Strat, Tele, Les Paul, whatever, and then at some stage, when they've got all those, they'll look at Firebirds and other things. I don't think there's many people who'd pick a Firebird as their number-one guitar without having anything else in the back room. That's probably not going to change until somebody really famous starts playing one. But that's good because it keeps values down and allows people to enter the vintage marketplace reasonably easily, especially with non-reverse Firebirds."

What other areas are good to look at if you're entering the vintage market?
"Certainly, Firebirds are a very exciting area. They're unique. They have their own little foibles and they're cool guitars as well. Other areas people might want to look at are Melody Makers. They're starting to get on a rise now, especially the early 60s double-cut ones with two pickups."

Finally, how often do you tend to have Firebirds come in at ATB?
"We've always enjoyed having Firebirds. I don't think there's ever been a point where we've not had at least one. We particularly like the reverse-body ones and the VIIs, and when we have really nice custom colour ones, I'm amazed at how quickly they spring out of the door." G

www.atbguitars.com

DUKE LEVINE

What makes a great professional guitarist? Excellent chops, world experience, all-round versatility, eclectic taste in music, superb tones and the ability to blend seamlessly into a new band – all talents of Duke Levine, who recently took over guitar duties in Bonnie Raitt's band of premier musicians

Words Bob Hewitt

Bonnie Raitt has been a constant presence on the international music scene for over 50 years, collaborating with many – from Sippie Wallace to Mavis Staples, John Lee Hooker to John Prine – and boasts a long list of best-selling albums, with 13 Grammy Awards from 30 nominations to her name, as well as the honour of receiving the Lifetime Achievement Grammy in 2022. Not bad for someone who was discounted earlier this year as "an unknown blues singer" by a certain UK tabloid...

Her own core band has been by her side for over 30 years, including guitarist and sometimes co-writer George Marinelli, Ricky Fataar on drums and James 'Hutch' Hutchinson on bass, while keyboard player Glenn Patscha joined the band a few years back in 2018. When George Marinelli decided to take a break from touring, Boston-based guitarist Duke Levine stepped up seamlessly into the role.

Getting His Groove

Having grown up in a house full of musical siblings during the 60s, Duke's history with the guitar is a long one. "I have three older brothers and a sister, so I benefited from their record collections," he tells us over the phone from a tour in Hawaii, "and a lot of it was good stuff: The Beatles, Stones, The Band, Paul Butterfield – but also Merle Haggard and Doc Watson. [My older brothers] all played guitars, so they showed my sister and I some chords to get us going – and at the same time my brother Rick had a country rock band that rehearsed at our house most every day, so that was pretty cool to experience."

As time progressed, Duke extended his musical tastes, listening to the Grateful Dead, The Allman Brothers, Little Feat, Ry Cooder and, ironically, Bonnie Raitt. He also expanded his interest in jazz music. By the time he was 14, Duke had taken on a part-time job in a local guitar store near his home in Worcester, Massachusetts, and he also took the opportunity to study with a guitar teacher, the brilliant jazz guitarist Rich Falco who instilled a love for jazz standards that would stand Duke in good stead for his future ambitions and virtuosity.

Duke went on to study at the world-renowned New England Conservatory Of Music in Boston, and following graduation took a dive into the deep end by hooking up with blues legend Otis Rush for a European tour.

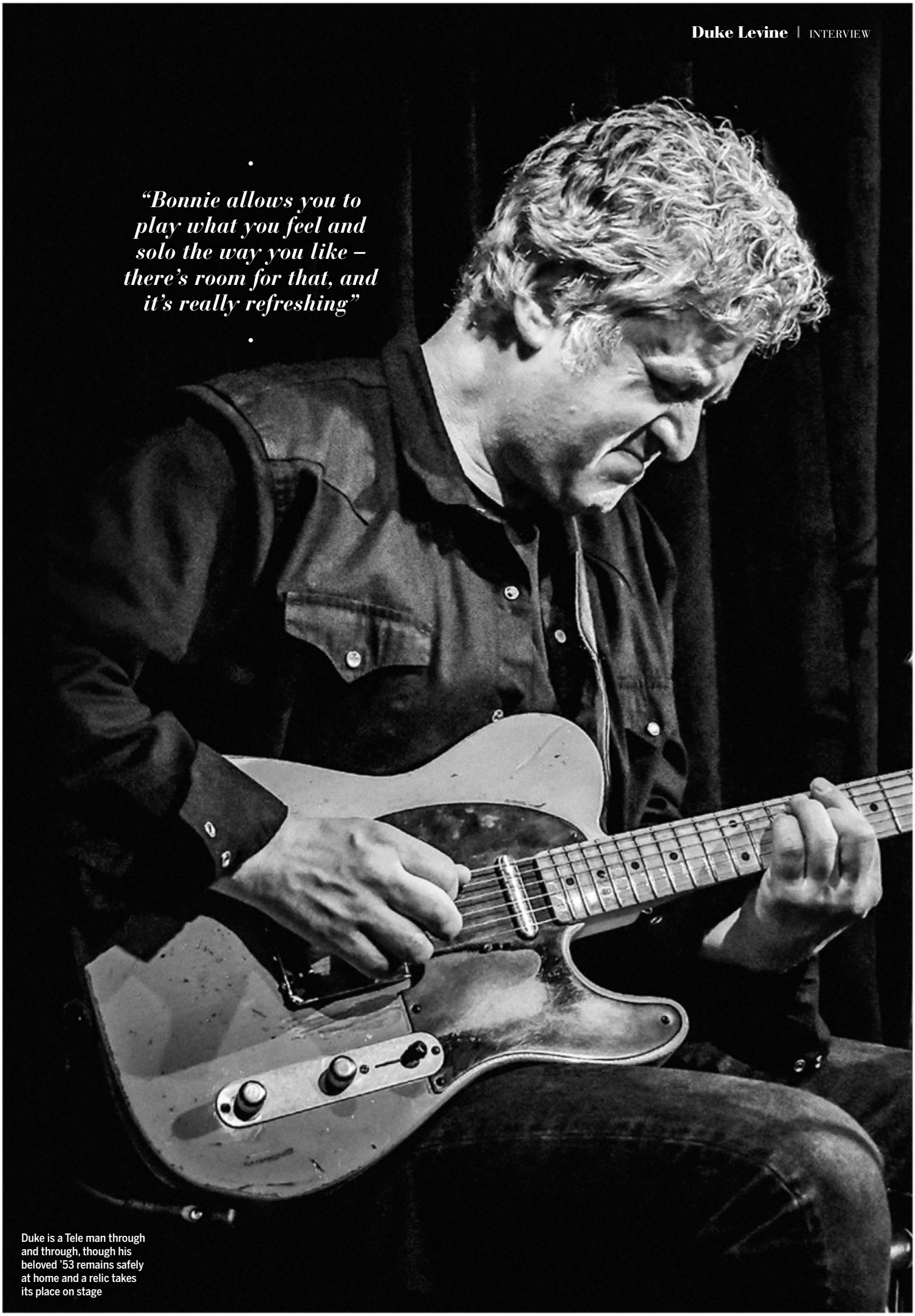
"I always feel I had no business playing alongside Otis Rush at that age," Duke admits. "I just wish I'd known as much about him then as I do now. Otis was super gracious, really cool and had a great rhythm section. It was one of those things whereby the piano player put the touring band together, and we did the European circuit of festivals like Montreux, North Sea and all that. It was the most amazing experience for me."

Tours followed with Leon Thomas, 'the John Coltrane of jazz vocalists', and jazz drummer Bob Moses in the band Mozamba before Duke joined Boston rockers The Del Fuegos on tour and began to explore the city's session scene during the early 90s.

"There were so many singers and songwriters around Boston in those days," says Duke. "People were moving in from outside the area to be in Cambridge [Massachusetts] because it was such a cool scene. Producers needed musicians to make records, so it was a great time to be right there and involved.

"I also met my friend Mason Daring, who's a film composer, and started working with him on a bunch of movie sets he was scoring [including John Sayles' *Lone Star*, *Passion Fish*, *Sunshine State* and *Limbo*]. This was a really important time for me because he ended up putting out my first three records on his label – *Nobody's Home* [1992], *Country Soul Guitar* [1994] and *Lava* [1997]. About this same time, there was still a little bit of jingle and advertisement business, too, so it was a busy time to be working around there."

"Bonnie allows you to play what you feel and solo the way you like – there's room for that, and it's really refreshing"



Duke is a Tele man through and through, though his beloved '53 remains safely at home and a relic takes its place on stage

Duke continued his band and touring work during this time, playing with major label folk-rock duo The Story, which also connected him with five-time Grammy-winning singer-songwriter Mary Chapin Carpenter, with whom he played until the early 2000s. He then joined The J Geils Band's Peter Wolf in the studio and on stage until he got the call from Bonnie Raitt.

Raitt Hand Man

"It's been a trip," says Duke, who started rehearsals back in January 2022. "Everyone has been so appreciative and supportive, welcoming the way someone new plays. It was a little daunting to come in after George [Marinelli] who has been with Bonnie for 30 years, but it's such a great band with Ricky [Fataar, drummer] and Hutch [bassist James Hutchinson] who have been there even longer. I've learned a lot and I love playing alongside these guys.

"Bonnie allows you to play what you feel and solo the way you like – it's never been a case of the artist wanting you to play the exact same thing every night – so there's room for that, and it's really refreshing. There's a ton of personality in George's playing, and we're pretty different as players, but I love learning what he did. All that being said, Bonnie was very welcoming and realised that we're not the same players with the same sound. For about half of the 2022 tour dates, it was the two of us in the band together, and it was great because I love playing alongside George. It was brilliant to see first hand the stuff that I'd be taking over on some of the songs. It was a real privilege to be on stage together – and I've made a great new friend."

When it comes to tools of the trade, Duke is devoted to his Telecasters. "My main guitar is a '63 Tele' and I use a '53 relic as well on stage, as I've left my real '53 at home," he laughs. "My Telecaster is the guitar I can play [pretty much] anything on – and I feel I've developed a sound of my own to some degree with that guitar. All the other stuff is great, and I've got some nice Les Pauls, an Epiphone Casino and some Gretsches, too. It's cool on a session to have a bunch of different guitars. But, more and more, I just feel it's a distraction to have more than a couple of guitars on a gig. I do enjoy lap steel, too, for textural sounds when required – a friend got me into a cool tuning, so I'm working on that to figure out some cool licks.

•

"My Telecaster is the guitar I can play [pretty much] anything on – and I've developed a sound of my own with that guitar"

•

"On the current tour, I have this Supro Dual-Tone that I love and I've had it for a long time," he continues. "It's kept in open tuning with heavy strings for a couple of tunes. I have a Strat, too, for a couple of things. But, really, the Tele is *the* guitar, and I can get whatever I need out of it. I also play mandolin and mandola on a couple of Bonnie's songs."

For his backline, it's a British influence with a twist as Duke's favourite amp is a Blockhead – a copy of the early Marshall JTM45. But on this tour he's opted for the real thing with a late-70s Marshall JMP 50-watt master volume head, which fits in and suits the sound of the band, he says: "I'm just playing it through a 1x12 cab, which is isolated because we use in-ear monitors, and although my cab is on stage, it's baffled so I don't get it too much."

As for pedals, Duke's 'board includes a Mad Professor Royal Blue Overdrive, the Jam Rattler overdrive and Jam Harmonious Monk harmonic tremolo, plus a T.Rex Replica and Source Audio delay unit. There's also the Ethos TWE-1 from Vermont-based Custom Tones, who created a pedal based on Ken Fischer's famed Trainwreck amplifier.

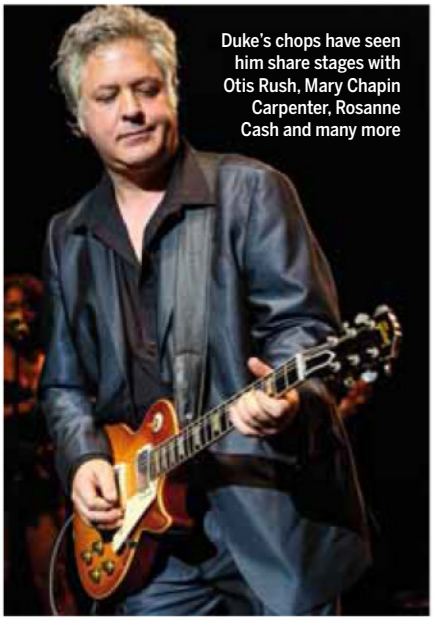
Instrumental Moves

When he finds time between his busy touring commitments, Duke performs instrumental arrangements with his band, the Super Sweet Sounds Of The 70s, alongside longtime friend and Berklee College assistant professor Kevin Barry, who has recorded with Paula Cole, Mary Chapin Carpenter and Susan Tedeschi, and played with Ray LaMontagne and Rosanne Cash.

Finally, there's Duke's solo instrumental work, on which you'll hear the hi-fidelity sounds and tones he created for albums such as 2016's *The Fade Out*. "I loved Hank Marvin on those Shadows records, so there could well be an unconscious influence for my instrumental recordings. But my early records had a lot of picking on them and country stuff as I was eager to show off what I could do as a younger person. I think at a certain point, even then, I always wanted to have tunes that were just more melody based – instrumental guitar music without having all the licks – so on my last couple of records, I think we're more in that direction." G

https://dukelevine.com

Duke's main '63 Tele (left), with his Strat from the same year and his 1953 Tele



Duke's chops have seen him share stages with Otis Rush, Mary Chapin Carpenter, Rosanne Cash and many more

PHOTO BY SCOTT LEGATO/GETTY IMAGES

Duke plays alongside Bonnie Raitt on *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert* in June 2022

PHOTO BY SCOTT KOWALCHYK/CBS VIA GETTY IMAGES

RIGHT PLACE, RAITT TIME

Bonnie Raitt on her new guitar sideman

"In the beginning, we had George Marinelli *and* Duke Levine together at rehearsals," Bonnie tells us from California, "so Duke was able to watch and listen to the various guitar parts that George contributes to songs like *Need You Tonight* and *Livin' For The Ones*, and the different songs that we cover. George often overdubs two or three parts – and it's the same with keyboards, as there's often three or four keyboards parts. So when you perform live and you only have a four-piece band, you have to figure out which parts you're going to take.

"Deciding which part of the song deserves this particular guitar part, or how you can make it an artful mix of the three guitar parts, is something George has been expert at because he played on most of the records. Duke was able to check this out and see just what he was doing. The two of them were just fantastic together. They stayed [musically] out of each other's way, their tones and their instruments sound different enough – and then, of course, you've got my [slide] guitar added to the mix."

While Bonnie uses her slide playing selectively, she still plays the same Strat that she bought in 1969 for $120. "The neck suited my hand – and it had no paint on it, which I thought was really cool...

"As a musical director, it's a bit challenging to make sure we're not all playing the identical 'Strat sound' at the same time," she continues, "or playing in the same part of the neck! But we've all been doing this long enough and it was fun to see and hear how George and Duke played together.

> *"I've been knocked out every night at the sensitivity Duke brings, as well as his ferocity as a soloist"*

There were certain parts when George would lead and Duke would hold back, then others when the roles were reversed and Duke would play – but without stepping on each other's toes.

"Duke is something completely new – his guitars, his tones, his pedals – and his tastes are different from George['s], so it's fun for us and the audiences to have a fresh approach. George and Duke are equally brilliant and such nice guys, too. I've enjoyed Duke's playing from afar for many years, and his reputation precedes him, so I was so pleased when he agreed to step in.

"I like Duke's soulful soloing and the inventive lyrical ways he blends with my own guitar style and around my voice on the ballads. I've been knocked out every night at the sensitivity he brings, as well as his ferocity as a soloist. Duke never overplays, which is important to me and one of the things I love about George Marinelli's playing. That's why I chose Duke because I think he's really tasteful, but he's got a lot of fire as well; he banks that fire and doesn't show off, which is what I like about him."

Back In Black

While PRS has been making its mark on the bolt-on market, we finally get a new Core model, the shape-shifting modern Eagle V. But is it really new?

Words Dave Burrluck
Photography Olly Curtis

PRS MODERN EAGLE V

£4,599

CONTACT **PRS Europe** PHONE **01223 874301** WEB **www.prsguitars.com**

What You Need To Know

1. **An opaque black PRS is rare...** Yes. In fact, when we were chatting to Paul Reed Smith, he didn't think they offered the guitar in that colour! It also comes in another opaque colour, Antique White, plus the more usual translucent 'bursts that show off the figured maple tops.

2. **There aren't too many three-pickup PRSes, either, are there?** The original Customs are the definitive PRS guitars and they always had (and still have) two humbuckers. The first three-pickup PRS was the HSS Studio in 1988, then there was the three-single-coil EG 3 and HSS EG 4 in 1990. Since then, there have been plenty, both set-neck and bolt-on, including the Silver Sky, Fiore, Studio, Special Semi Hollow and SE Silver Sky in the current 2023 line-up.

3. **How many sounds can you get?** There are 17 sound options here – and while that number is high, the 2019 Private Stock Modern Eagle V actually had another switch by the volume control to simulate a 500k or 250kohm volume pot. Technically, though its effect was pretty subtle, that meant it had 34 sound options!

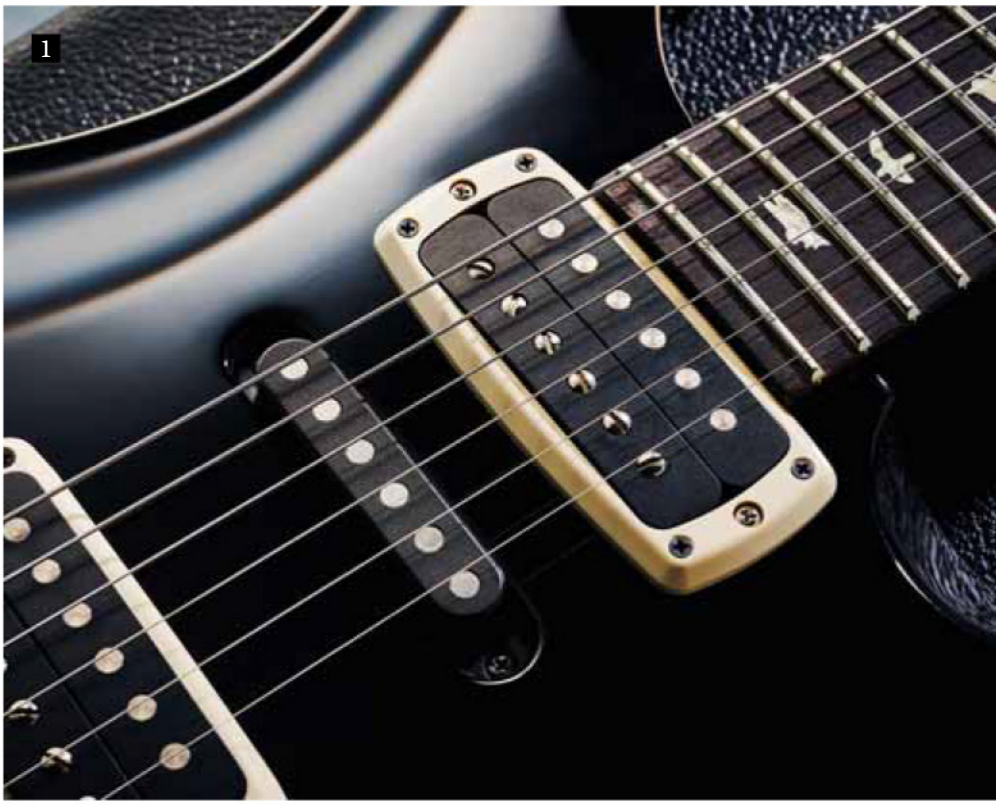
Here's a guitar we've been waiting for since early 2019 when Paul Reed Smith showed us the prototype at a dealer event in the UK. Technically, it has been available first as a cost-a-lot 2019 Private Stock limited run of 120, followed in 2020 by a 200-only Experience run and subsequent special dealer-order Wood Library versions. Now comes this new unlimited version, which we'd planned to feature in our previous issue until the Myles Kennedy signature and NF 53 were suddenly launched. PRS has certainly been busy.

Replacing the outgoing 509, the new Modern Eagle V is a rare addition to the main Core line, the top tier of PRS's USA set-neck production. Obviously, it's the fifth iteration of the Modern Eagle model, which dates back to 2004; version four, the Quatro, launched in 2010 and lasted just a couple of years in the catalogue. Our V version has two humbuckers and additional middle-placed single coil. Though it's not the first three-pickup ME – the celebratory 25th Anniversary ME II from 2010 featured three Narrowfield mini-humbuckers – it does boast 17 different sounds.

The tuners' string posts are unplated and use a simple top-locking mechanism. The nut here is bone, while the headstock facing is East Indian rosewood

THE RIVALS

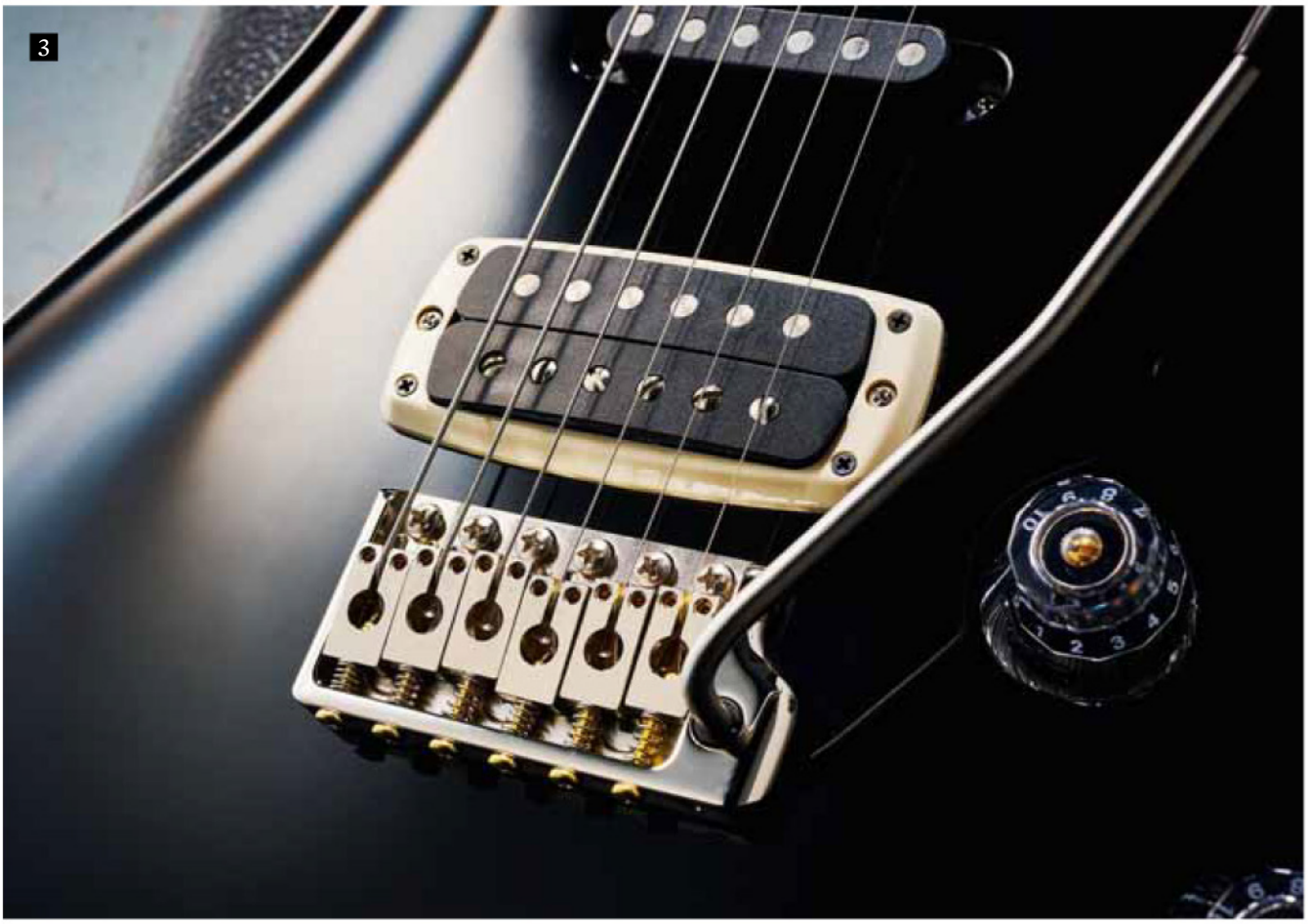
Not for the first time, PRS has a fair number of options within its own range when it comes to 'Swiss Army knife' guitars. The twin-humbucking Custom 24-08 (from £4,299) has true single-coil switching for each pickup, like the MEV, and has eight switching options. The Special Semi Hollow (from £4,599) has two humbuckers with a Narrowfield 'bucker in the middle position and 12 options. The outgoing 509 (from £4,399, which is effectively replaced by the MEV) has five coils – two outer dual-coil humbuckers with a single coil in between – and offers nine sounds.

HSH-loaded guitars are usually associated with more progressive styles and brands, and there's a huge amount of choice. Ibanez has quite a few. The newer AZ2407F-SDE Prestige might have a roasted maple bolt-on but comes with a more vintage-style vibrato and figured maple top in Sodalite Blue. This Japanese-made guitar costs approximately £2k.

Outwardly, the MEV is all about its sonic options, but let's not forget the guitar. It's a near 40-year-old design that's been constantly tweaked to a detailed level of quality that's still setting standards. The 'Modern Benchmark' isn't quite as catchy as a name, but it's more apt. Based on that original 1985 PRS Custom, in this rare all-black gloss nitro livery it might have been called a Standard back in the day. Aside from the dark East Indian rosewood fingerboard and headstock veneer, the only other wood we can see is the natural edge of the maple top – the 'binding'. In a translucent colour you'd see that hallmark figured maple top, a one-piece quarter-sawn Honduran mahogany neck and also its one-piece African mahogany body back.

1. The TCI neck pickup is reversed so that the slug coil that's voiced in the true single-coil sits, relatively, in a very similar place to a Stratocaster. That NS-01 middle pickup is kept as small as possible with flush magnets so it doesn't get in the way of your picking hand

From the wood choice and weight to the TCI pickups and circuit tweaking, the neck shape and playability – it's all first class

Equally established is the proprietary hardware, the Phase III top-locking and open-backed tuners designed not just for function but to maximise the string's energy. Then there's the finely machined, all-brass Gen III vibrato – only available from Core level upwards – which has evolved from the original PRS design. Again, function and sound lie behind the gradual evolution of this vibrato.

2. The East Indian rosewood 'board has a 635mm (25-inch) scale length like the original Custom, plus features 22 frets and those iconic bird inlays

3. Virtually all hardware and parts are now proprietary PRS designs, such as these pickup mounting rings, for example. The Gen III vibrato is based on the original PRS design that dates back to the mid-80s

4. The MEV offers the most sounds of any current PRS guitar at 17 in total, even though we've lost one switch from this Core version compared with the original Private Stock and Experience versions

Like that original Custom, the scale length is 635mm (25 inches), the 'halfway house' between Fender and Gibson that was always a part of the sonic duality of the PRS proposition along with its dual humbuckers and vibrato – blurring the lines between the classic Les Paul and Stratocaster. But utilising three pickups seems to be becoming a bit of a trend for PRS. The last two additions to the Core line-up, the Studio and the Special Semi Hollow, also have three pickups, like the recent additions to the Bolt-On range, the Silver Sky and Fiore. Here, the outer TCI humbuckers are the narrower 408 bass (neck) pickup style, also featured on Paul's Guitar, augmented by a narrow single coil (not a humbucker) in the middle position.

While the previous versions of the MEV featured three small-tipped mini-toggle switches, here we lose the one that switched the volume control from 500k to 250kohms (see Under The Hood, opposite), while the two remaining mini-switches switch each humbucker to true single-coil mode, as before. While the five-way lever pickup selector gives us the usual Stratocaster-type selections, a pull-switch on the tone control allows all three pickups to be voiced together, or the neck and bridge to be combined.

Feel & Sounds

The MEV's gloss black is mirror-perfect. The only problem is that, even with a little playing, the finger marks make it look like it's done a few hours of gigs. Conversely, it does somehow appear less precious than the typically PRS figured maple aesthetic, and that opaque colour seems to draw your

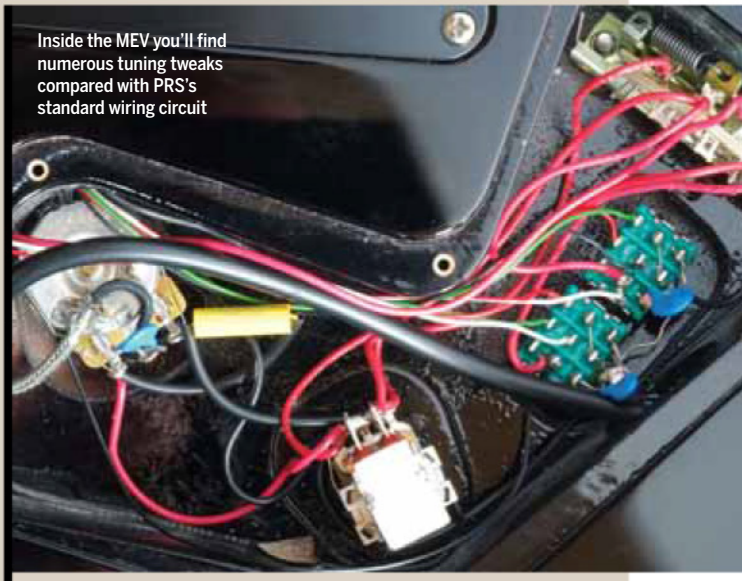
5. The gloss all-black nitro finish is flawless, and while it does highlight any sticky finger marks, it also accentuates the attractive contours of the guitar itself

eye to the curves and contours instead of the wood grain. It's a near-perfect weight at 3.54kg (7.79lb), too, and if you can find a fault here in either the build, finish or the high-level playability, well, you're better than us.

The Pattern neck profile is based on the long-running Wide-Fat and feels like an old friend with a width of 43.3mm at the nut and 53mm by the 12th. Depth-wise, it measures 22mm at the 1st fret and 24mm by the 12th. Our spec sheet tells us we have PRS's 'vintage' fretwire, also used on Paul's Guitar, but our callipers tell us it's a little wider: approximately 2.8mm wide and 1.3mm high, more like those used on the DGT. To say a neck 'disappears' is a bit of a cliché, but this one feels like home.

If the craft is impressive, so are the sounds. Trust us, it'll take you a while to get to know all 17 options. But is that the point? PRS has blurred the boundaries between humbuckers and single coil-like sounds many times before and it gives this

If the craft is impressive, so are the sounds. The 17 options give this instrument a chameleon-like voice that's hard to pin down



Inside the MEV you'll find numerous tuning tweaks compared with PRS's standard wiring circuit

UNDER THE HOOD

What's inside this latest Core model?

When the original MEV launched, it boasted three mini-toggle switches, a five-way lever pickup selector switch and a pull-switch on the tone control: switch-tastic! Today's circuit is basically the same, although we've lost the switch that simulated the effect of either a 500k or 250k volume control. To be fair, its effect proved pretty subtle, and here, as with many recent PRS instruments, a resistor (1.5meg-ohms) is placed (in parallel) on the volume control to lower the resistance from its nominal 500k to a resistance that actually measures 384k.

Two three-pole mini-switches are used to switch each humbucker to 'true' single coil where the screw coil of each is removed from the circuit as opposed to the usual method of dumping (fully or partially) the unwanted coil to ground. Remember the neck pickup is reversed, so the slug coil faces the fingerboard not the bridge.

Further tuning is achieved by a parallel capacitor on each pickup switch: 220 picofarads on the bridge, 330 picofarards on the neck. "It's TCI – tuning the capacitance and inductance of the pickup to the sound I want. If you unsolder the capacitors, then it's not going to sound as good: you'd hear a huge difference," says PRS.

A third small capacitor is used for the treble bleed on the volume control, which is 180picofarads, as usual for PRS.

The pull-switch on the tone control creates what many will know as the 'seven sound' mod, which is typically used on a Stratocaster and allows positions 1 and 5 on the five-way for the bridge and neck pickups to be combined, and all three pickups to be voiced in positions 2, 3 and 4. These selections are the same in either humbucker or true single-coil mode. As with all of the two-control PRS guitars we've evaluated over recent years, the circuit is wired modern style with a .033µf tone capacitor.

All of this tweakery produces plenty of sonic textures from the MEV, 17 in total, but some are more subtle than others, not least the four combinations of 'all three pickups on' in humbucker mode, single-coil mode, neck hum/bridge single, and neck single/bridge hum.

These latest Phase III locking tuners illustrate PRS's goal of function and sound. There's no plating anywhere nor any plastic washers, while the collar on the button shaft aims to isolate the effect of the tuner's button and maximise the string's vibration

instrument a chameleon-like voice that's hard to pin down or pigeonhole.

Rather than nailing a '59 Burst at the neck, for example, we're treated to a full-bodied voice that has exceptional balance between thickness, clarity and a smooth velveteen texture. Switching to the bridge, we do get a little PAF-like honk, but there's no shrillness: the highs remain clear with pokey thickness. The true single-coil sounds are noticeably different but superbly balanced in that the highs are more present, the mids relaxed and there's more cut to the bass response. It is Fender-y but put through Mr Smith's particular channel strip and carefully and musically EQ'd. The highs are never sharp, and the lows or mids don't run away with you or sound deficient.

We were lucky enough to share the MEV's test time with those new Myles Kennedy and NF 53 bolt-ons from last issue, plus the PRS CE 24 Satin Nitro Ltd. All very fine guitars, but if they come across as roadhorses, the MEV somehow absorbs those sounds and presents them in perfectly produced tuxedo style. Of course, the MEV is more expensive, just about double what you'd pay for that CE 24, but, honestly, it feels a couple of levels up in everything from the hardware to the super-smooth finish, which is *very* different from that more rudimentary-looking CE 24. The MEV's palette of sounds comes across as being more refined, too, and that's on top of a perfect setup, very stable tuning and sweet intonation. The MEV doesn't quite play itself, but it's close.

Verdict

In two years PRS will celebrate four decades of high-level guitar making, all under the watchful eyes and ears of Paul Reed Smith. The cumulative experience in the now sizable building in Stevensville, Maryland, is probably unmatched along with the attention to the smallest detail, the proprietary hardware, pickups and circuitry.

The MEV has the biggest selection of (sometimes subtly) different sound options of any current PRS Core guitar, but don't forget all but a few – namely, the Tremonti and Santana signatures – offer both humbucking and single coil sounds. For the working musician, not to mention recording player, the MEV is the latest in a long line of Swiss Army knife do-it-all instruments. The best so far? We think so, but unless Mr Smith decides to hang up his sonic shoes anytime soon, we'll guarantee it won't be the last. G

PRS MODERN EAGLE V

PRICE: £4,599 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Double-cutaway, carved-top solidbody electric
BODY: 1-piece mahogany with figured maple top
NECK: 1-piece mahogany, pattern profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 635mm (25")
NUT: Bone
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, outline bird w/ centre inlays, 254mm (10") radius
FRETS: 22, medium
HARDWARE: PRS Gen III vibrato, PRS Phase III locking tuners (w/brass posts and aluminium buttons)
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm
ELECTRICS: PRS TCI Treble and Bass humbuckers, NS-01 single coil in middle position, 5-way toggle pickup selector switch, 2x mini-toggle switches for independent pickup single coil/humbucking modes, master volume and master tone (with pull switch to select bridge and neck or all 3 pickups together)
OPTIONS: 10 top/hybrid hardware (£5,315)
RANGE OPTIONS: The Core range starts with the classic Custom 24 (£4,085). Other current 3-pickup Core models include the Studio (£4,399) and Special Semi-Hollow (£4,599)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Black (as reviewed) and Antique White opaque colours plus choice of 12 trans colours including McCarty Sunburst, Purple Mist and Yellow Tiger

Guitarist GOLD **10/10**

PROS Everything! From the wood choice and weight through to the latest version of the PRS TCI pickups and circuit tweaking, the neck shape and playability – it's all first class

CONS Well, quality costs, but apart from a disregard for left-handed players, nothing!

Manson

GUITAR WORKS

ORYX VI
DRY SATIN
BLACK

ORYX VII
NOLLY RACING
GREEN

Guitarist
GEAR OF THE YEAR

Designed in collaboration with Adam 'Nolly' Getgood

ORYX

Experience In Sound

The sonic adventures of Paul Reed Smith show no signs of slowing down. We drop in for a catch-up, but can we keep up?

Words Dave Burrluck

As our many interviews over our past 500 issues will confirm, a conversation with Paul Reed Smith is never straightforward. In early May of this year, Paul sounds upbeat: "There's a lot going on here... and in general it's all good!" he wise-cracks, before turning the table and asking us what we think of the new PRS Core Modern Eagle V. "Not bad? Is that all we get?"

Getting our interview back on track, we remind Paul that he showed this writer the MEV prototype back in early 2019...

What took so long for the Modern Eagle V to become a Core model?
"Covid, our back orders... I mean, we've made a bunch of them and now it's a Core model. The Modern Eagle V was just about getting a pile of good tones that sounded industry-standard and our way, both."

It's pretty much the same as Paul's Guitar, not least the TCI humbuckers based on the earlier 408 neck-pickup style (but with the exception of an additional middle pickup and a couple of different switch functions). So, why wasn't it called 'Paul's Guitar II'?
"That's more of a marketing decision, but I don't really see it as a 'Paul's Guitar II' because I don't play one. I play a much more simple guitar. If I didn't have a middle position [both pickups together] or even single-coil switches I'd be happy. For me, it's a much simpler operation – almost like the guitar player in the Atlanta Rhythm Section [Barry Bailey], he had two tones and, oh my, was he good with them. That middle pickup is an industry-standard thing, but making them small and getting them to sound good is difficult. I guess we thought it's the next step for the Modern Eagle, rather than what I personally use."

The new Core version has actually lost one switch – the 500k/250k option.
"We ended up splitting the difference, not that one was too dark and the other one was too bright, but we just split the difference. That resistor [added to the volume control] brings it down to about 375kohms. It's interesting, Eric Johnson has come down to a 400k pot, it's not an uncommon value. The whole idea of the resistor is that you can change the value of the pot: if you have a 500k pot and you put a 500k resistor on it, suddenly you have a 250k pot. It works like a charm."

Very little else seems to have changed, though we did notice the resistance readings of the humbuckers appear lower than the first version Private Stock MEV model we looked at back in issue 453. Have you tweaked the TCI pickups?

Based on the original 513 from 2004, the outgoing 509 continued the three-pickup 'five coil' concept and joined the PRS line in 2017, offering nine sounds. Back then, it was the only three-pickup guitar in the PRS range

The Modern Eagle V first appeared in 2019 as this sumptuous £9k Private Stock run of just 120 instruments. With its extra 500k/250k mini-switch by the volume control, it offered 34 sounds!

"Yes, mostly from feedback from owners, but the moves have been very subtle. Most of the reason that the resistance of the pickups is less is not because we have less turns but because the diameter of the wire is very, very slightly bigger. I mean, if you have 6,000 turns you're multiplying the difference of each turn by 6,000, so an incredibly subtle difference in the wire becomes pretty big by the end because you're multiplying it by all those turns."

Despite the different size of the TCI humbuckers, are they pretty standard in terms of their wire and magnets?

"I like these pickups. Let's think of the P-90. If you were to put two of those together, like a humbucker, you'd have two magnets in the middle and a magnet on each outside. Now, in a standard humbucker there's only one magnet in the middle; there are no magnets on the outside. But these pickups have 'wing' magnets so that both sides of each coil have a magnetic field, like a P-90 where both sides [of the coil] have a magnetic field. We use [wing magnets] sometimes on other pickups: for example, on the treble pickup [85/15] of a Custom. Sometimes generating the magnetic field on both sides of the coil really helps the pickup and also makes it a lot louder. These 408-style pickups, as you call them, are pretty loud."

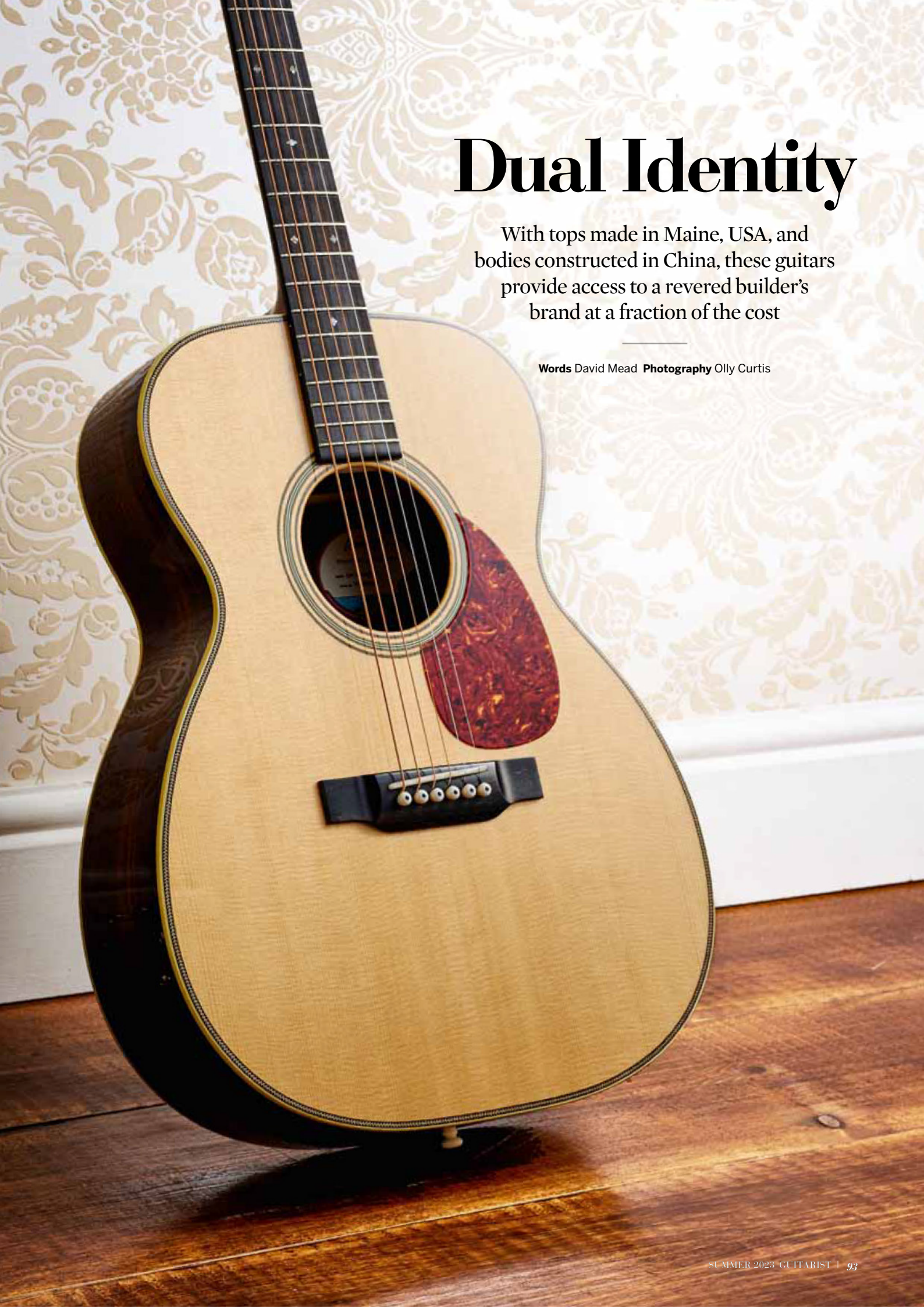
> "These pickups have 'wing' magnets so that both sides of each coil have a magnetic field, like a P-90" ***Paul Reed Smith***

Conversely, the middle pickup looks like a Tele neck pickup without the cover on.

"Yes, that's basically what it looks like. The Tele neck pickup cover ruins the sound of it: if you take that big-assed brass thing off an original Tele bass pickup, it sounds better. It was hard to get it to sound the same as a full-size single coil, but I think it does. It's smaller so it doesn't get in the way when you're picking. You gotta remember that the magnets on the Tele's bass pickup are flush, and the magnets on the bridge pickup are sometimes flush, too, and nobody has a problem with that – flush magnets on single coils work. That's why we didn't go with even a Narrowfield [humbucker] in the middle position, so it didn't get in the way.

"The MEV is done really well in the standard way, but there are some non-standard ways coming later this year. We have another signature guitar planned for release imminently that uses a completely different kind of single-coil sound: the single coil switches on that guitar are completely different [to the MEV] and hum-cancelling. It works like God unless you plug into something like a Fuzz Face, which has a weird input impedance. But if the input impedance is standard in our industry, oh, do they sound like single coils. John [McLaughlin] said to me, 'Don't you dare change that wiring.' He's one of our geniuses, he's extraordinary [says Paul, as he unveils yet another Private Stock level signature guitar]."

Paul certainly chooses top-level players to work with and, ultimately, satisfy. You could suggest that's where he does his learning. From Carlos Santana, a relationship that started in the early 80s before PRS Guitars was in production and called for Paul to create a non-locking vibrato that stayed in tune, through David Grissom, who challenged Paul to improve the sound of his guitars in the early 90s, to more recent tie-ups with John Mayer, Joe Walsh, Mark Lettieri, Robben Ford, Myles Kennedy and now John McLaughlin. Who's next? G



Dual Identity

With tops made in Maine, USA, and bodies constructed in China, these guitars provide access to a revered builder's brand at a fraction of the cost

Words David Mead **Photography** Olly Curtis

BOURGEOIS TOUCHSTONE VINTAGE TS OM & TS D **£2,699 EACH**

CONTACT **Bourgeois Guitars** PHONE **+ 207 786 0385** WEB **www.bourgeoisguitars.com**

What You Need To Know

1 **So, are these Eastman or Bourgeois guitars?**
A hybrid of both. The tops of the guitars are made in Dana Bourgeois' Maine workshops by him and his team and then sent to Eastman's facility in China where specially trained luthiers affix the tops to the bodies.

2 **What is Dana Bourgeois' involvement here?**
The choice of timber, tap-testing, tone-shaping and bracing patterning are all done to Dana's specific design. The team in China has been "trained in Dana Bourgeois' time-honoured building techniques". Hence the guitars bearing the Bourgeois name.

3 **Will there be any more models forthcoming from the Eastman/ Bourgeois alliance?**
Yes, there are new models planned for release in the coming months. So far we've heard of the Country Boy dreadnought and OM, which Dana expands upon in our interview on page 100.

Dana Bourgeois has been building guitars since the 1970s and has become something of a legend in the world of boutique lutherie. In fact, early 2023 saw Dana's 10,000th instrument leave his workshop. He has pioneered many techniques and innovative practices into the art and it's no surprise that instruments bearing the Bourgeois name are highly prized among players worldwide. As you might imagine, this kind of reputation means that acoustics that bear his mark are the upper end of the price bracket and until now his guitars have been out of reach of enthusiastic amateurs and many serious-minded semi-pros alike. Thanks to a unique turn of events that involves teaming up with the respected Eastman company, Bourgeois guitars are entering a new era whereby the new Touchstone range is far more accessible.

We'll get to the details of this new liaison in a minute, but for now let it be said that every guitar we've reviewed from Eastman has turned out to be something a little bit special. The build is generally excellent on both electric and acoustic models, and sound quality is always of the highest order.

2

This collaboration between Eastman and Bourgeois means the costs of building can be cut and savings passed onto players

To summarise, every time an Eastman guitar has found its way into our hands piggy banks have come under serious threat.

So what exactly is the plan with the new Touchstone series? Well, the collaboration here sees the tops of the guitars selected, tap-toned, braced and generally crafted at Dana's workshop in Lewiston, Maine. Then the tops are packed up and sent to Eastman's facility in China where a small team – trained by Dana – attach the tops to backs, sides, necks and so on before the complete instruments are shipped back to Lewiston where each one is set up and finessed by one of Dana's team before being released into the wild.

In essence, this rather long-winded process means that the costs of building can be cut and savings passed onto players worldwide, who end up paying a fraction of what an all-USA-built Bourgeois guitar would normally cost. Sounds like a good deal? It does to us as we've had the opportunity to audition some of Dana's instruments in the past and can attest to the quality of build, tone and playability. When details of the Touchstone series were announced last year, we literally couldn't wait to get our hands on them. They took a while to find their way over to the European market – they've been available in the US since the middle of 2022 – but now they've arrived. So what have we got?

At this point, there are only two models available, an OM and a dreadnought, and that's exactly what we have before us today. But we have heard word that the range is going to be extended with a mahogany-backed – as opposed to the rosewood we find here – 'Country Boy' OM and dread, and there will be more to come in the future, too.

1. With a medium/low action, playability is excellent on both models

2. The tops are voiced and final setup is carried out at Dana Bourgeois' Lewiston, Maine facility

THE RIVALS

With the OM and dreadnought body sizes being arguably the most popular; just about every acoustic maker has produced its own take on both, ranging from budget/entry level right up to the heady atmospheres of the boutique. But if you've a budget of around £2.5k then you have access to lower reaches of both Martin's and Taylor's catalogues. For example, the standard Martin OM-18 and D-18 both street at £2,999, and the OM-28 and D-28 – the guitars upon which the Bourgeois here are based – are a touch more at around £3,229. A Taylor 314ce Auditorium (approximately the size of an OM) will set you back £1,887, rising to £3,799 for the 814ce.

In Eastman's homegrown product, both OMs and dreadnoughts abound. We were very partial to the E20ss/v that retails around £1,949 if a vintage finish is what you're after, not forgetting the E20OM-TC at £1,859. Manufacturers of other OM/dread models that have left an impression on us include Larrivée, Atkin, Furch and Yamaha.

3. Old-growth Sitka spruce tops sit on the Touchstones' backs and sides, which are made from Indian rosewood

4. Ziricote headstock veneers add even more class to a pair of guitars already ahead of the game in terms of spec

5. The herringbone binding on both instruments has been expertly carried out, giving the guitars some extra vintage mojo

6. Schaller GrandTune nickel tuners are present on both Bourgeois models to keep everything up to pitch

Part of Dana Bourgeois' brief for his instruments is balance throughout the tonal spectrum

The spec of the two models before us is much the same. Looking at the tops first, we have old-growth Alaskan Sitka spruce, braced with Adirondack spruce. There's an ebony bridge with a bone saddle and ivoroid bridge pins and there's also a faux tortoiseshell pickguard under the soundhole. You might think that if cost-cutting was a prime concern the guitar would be very plain and unadorned, but that's not the case here as the tops are trimmed with herringbone with a black and white rosette. As you're probably thinking, the mood here is pretty much pre-war Martin – D-28 and OM-28 – in both build and appearance.

As far as the other spec is concerned, the familiar theme continues with the back and sides made from Indian rosewood, the necks mahogany, fretboards ebony, with bone nuts that measure in at Dana's preferred 43.65mm, Schaller GrandTune tuners and headstock facings made from ziricote.

As we've said, this kind of spec on both an OM and dread we've seen countless times before and to say it's an almost infallible formula wouldn't be understating the facts. But here's where craft that has been fine-tuned via decades of building instruments comes into play. How important is tap-toning and shaping braces? Well, that's a question that we put to Dana in the interview that follows this review, but for now it's safe to think of the top assembly of an acoustic guitar as its tonal engine room. With skillful administration it will produce a set of rich overtones, balanced trebles and basses with superb clarity, all notes within a chord having their individual space, as well as superior ringing sustain. Without it, you just might find yourself rudderless in a sea of meh...

Feel & Sounds

Picking up the dreadnought first we immediately have our preconceptions tested. These big old buses of the acoustic world are renowned for powerful midrange and a bass response in the XXL range but have a tendency to land in the muddy lower mids. Dreads were never meant to be dainty and drawing-room approved; they were party animals, wild and boisterous accomplices to the solo singer-songwriter's trade. But not here. Part of Dana Bourgeois' brief for his instruments is balance throughout the tonal spectrum, with braces on the bass side of the soundboard specially

3

4

5

trimmed to achieve this. So, instead of a thunderous low-end, we find the kind of refinement usually only available at the hefty price tag end of the market. It's almost like someone has come along and tweaked your hi-fi's EQ and now suddenly you can hear everything in proportion without any jarring jagged edges. Make no mistake, there's bass here aplenty, it's just that it doesn't upset its neighbours – the midrange and trebles. There is volume, depth and, most importantly, great tone in this dread's 'hood. And that's really where the story starts with this instrument. The feel of the C-profiled neck is comfortable in the hand, the satin finish to the back making fretting both chords and single notes practically effortless. All in all, it proved to be an instrument that was very difficult to put down.

Turning our attention to the OM, it's a very similar story. With the reduced body size in both width and depth – and a favourite in these parts – it's slightly more manageable than its larger sibling, especially when played sitting down. But that would be true of an OM to dread comparison from any stable. There's a very similar feel to the neck and so actual playability is on par with the dread. From a sound point of view, OMs are known for a surprising amount of volume for their body size as well as a good amount of bass, and those boxes are well and truly ticked on the Touchstone. It shares that evenness of tonal

6

7. The Indian rosewood on the backs of the two guitars is superbly straight grained, acting with the specially voiced Sitka tops to offer a sound rich in overtones

response across the soundstage with its bigger brother with everything ringing clear and true, making the playing experience a very good one.

Verdict

According to the notes we've read on these guitars, the main aim of the Bourgeois/Eastman alliance was to produce instruments that had all the mojo of that golden pre-war era of acoustic guitars but with a few modern twists to further accentuate all of the good points we have come to revere. And, frankly, we think they've nailed it. We've already applauded the acoustics we've seen from Eastman in the past, but what Dana Bourgeois has brought to the table is very special indeed.

The main aim of this alliance was to produce acoustics with the mojo of the golden pre-war era with a few modern twists

Is the Touchstone range going to pose a challenge to Dana's homegrown brand? No. Play one and you'll be able to hear and feel why. But as an *entry* into the Bourgeois heritage – and note that it's 'Bourgeois' on the headstock, not 'Eastman' – these guitars represent excellent value at a £2.7k price point. If the acoustic sounds of yore are something you've been questing for, these guitars are going to introduce you to a new world of tonal bliss. G

BOURGEOIS TOUCHSTONE VINTAGE/TS OM

PRICE: £2,699 (inc hard case)
ORIGIN: USA/China
TYPE: OM
TOP: Alaskan Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Indian rosewood
MAX RIM DEPTH: 105mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 384mm
NECK: Honduran Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
TUNERS: Schaller GrandTune Nickel
NUT/WIDTH: 43.65mm
FINGERBOARD: Ebony
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: Ebony with bone saddle/52mm
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.95/4.3
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: As the dreadnought, right
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: High gloss

Guitarist GOLD 10/10

PROS An instrument that's superbly crafted by both parties; great tone at a very good price

CONS Nothing to declare!

BOURGEOIS TOUCHSTONE VINTAGE/TS D

PRICE: £2,699 (inc hard case)
ORIGIN: USA/China
TYPE: Dreadnought
TOP: Alaskan Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Indian rosewood
MAX RIM DEPTH: 121mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 396mm
NECK: Honduran Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
TUNERS: Schaller GrandTune Nickel
NUT/WIDTH: 43.65mm
FINGERBOARD: Ebony
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: Ebony with bone saddle/51mm
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.99/4.4
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: Just the dreadnought and OM models so far, but keep your eyes open for the Country Boy OM and Dreadnought coming soon
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: High gloss

Guitarist GOLD 10/10

PROS As with the OM, you get superior tone and a fabulous build – it's big, bold and beautiful

CONS We have no complaints

8. Dana Bourgeois recently reached a career milestone in that he completed the 10,000th guitar to leave his Maine, USA workshop

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Top Notch

We talk to Dana Bourgeois about the new Touchstone range, the importance of tuning in a guitar top, and what lies in the future for the series

Words David Mead

The alliance between Eastman and Bourgeois might mean that a great percentage of Touchstone construction is done in China, but it's carried out under Dana Bourgeois' strict supervision. Furthermore, his team in Maine is responsible for selecting, carving and generally engineering the guitars' tops and carrying out the final setup when the completed guitars are returned to the Bourgeois workshop. We ask Dana how this arrangement works in a practical sense, beginning with the forming of the tops.

What role does the top play on an acoustic guitar?

"Well, in a nutshell, the way a guitar works is that we excite the strings of the guitar with the pick or fingers, the strings move the bridge, the bridge moves the top, and the top essentially pumps air that disturbs our eardrums, and that's how we hear music. A common description of a fine guitar is that it has a piano-like tone. Well, what does that mean? It has a *complex* tone. And that means that the top is actually able to vibrate in all the different ways that strings are able to vibrate. And if it can't, then it actually acts as a filter. The worst thing would be a top that vibrated at one frequency – then we would have the equivalent of a tuning fork, which is a very sterile musical instrument.

"So what we try to do is voice the top so that it vibrates in as many different modes – or responds to as many different notes – as possible. That's just a technique that we've learned over many years of trial and error. It's a matter of flexing the top and making sure that it's the right stiffness in the right places by holding it in various places and tapping it and listening. Where is this top relative to where we would like it to be? And what do we have to do to move it in that direction? We're trying to get the top to be as responsive to as many different musical notes as possible. If you look at an electronic harmonic spectrum of the output of a guitar, it's not possible to get it to vibrate at every musical note. However, it is possible to optimise, and that's what we try to do."

How does that process begin?

"It actually starts with selecting the top for the model. We like stiffer tops for bigger guitars because they have to span a wider width and length. Then the second stage in the process is actually thicknessing the top to achieve a desired stiffness, both across and along the grain. That's something that a lot of hand-makers do but not a lot of other guitar manufacturers do.

"When the top is within a stiffness range that we consider acceptable, we glue the braces on. And then it goes through a number of steps of voicing. Some of it is done by rough carving, which is done by less experienced workers, and then more experienced workers do the finish work. Then even more experienced workers do the approval. Occasionally, we'll replace a brace or a couple braces, but that doesn't happen very often. It sounds like a very involved process, but we do it fairly quickly."

Dana Bourgeois built his first guitars in the early 70s and is now making his world-renowned acoustics available to even more players

> "We voice the top so that it vibrates in as many different modes – or responds to as many different notes – as possible"
> ***Dana Bourgeois***

The TS D we've reviewed is free of that muddy midrange often associated with dreadnoughts. How did you achieve that?

"The dreadnought has difficulty in achieving string-to-string balance. The

1. Experienced guitar makers in Bourgeois' workshop voice the tops before they're sent to the Chinese factory ready to be joined to the bodies

2. Dana works on voicing his 10,000th guitar, the OM Style 45 Custom, carefully chiselling the bracing structure of its Adirondack spruce top

> "By stiffening the top asymmetrically, we've added some clarity to the bottom-end of the dreadnought model"
> ***Dana Bourgeois***

larger guitars are typically bass-heavy, and they don't have the kind of treble response that a smaller guitar has. So we've altered the bracing a little bit in order to make it more asymmetrical and allow it to respond relatively freely to the lower frequencies. However, we wanted to stiffen it up in certain areas, which will add that singing quality to the high end of the register.

"Most instruments will generate a range of overtones with every note. So a bass note that is considered muddy or unclear would be one that doesn't have a lot of high-end overtones that add clarity and definition. By stiffening the top asymmetrically, we've added some clarity to the bottom-end and at the same time we've added that singing, sustaining quality to the treble. What we've actually done is we only scallop the bass side of the X-brace; we leave the treble side unscalloped. And we have a couple of other little tricks – the little finger braces on the sides are shaped differently, again, to create a stiff side and a flexible side. The idea is to introduce a little more asymmetry into the top of the guitar. And that seems to do very well for our dreadnoughts."

How does the collaboration with Eastman's Chinese facility work?

"We've passed on full drawings and we approved each part before we built prototypes, but what we give them is a completed, voiced top. We do that in our 'shop and we send them tops pretty much ready to glue on the body. We've given them instructions for selecting wood for backs, sides and necks. So we've communicated our specifications for selecting woods and we've communicated our specifications for voicing backs, too. Backs are not voiced in the same way that tops are, but it is possible to make them too stiff or too flexible. We've sent them examples of backs that we've made and taught them to tap and flex, and so on, and the results have been pretty good.

"We have bi-weekly meetings, via Zoom, and we go over our review of instruments that we've received, and we keep narrowing down the things that we still need to talk about. The objective is for Eastman to build guitars that are 100 per cent of the quality of the guitars that we produce in our Lewiston, Maine 'shop – to produce a guitar that is half the price of the guitar that we would build and far more than half the quality."

You've announced the forthcoming Country Boy models on your website. Are there plans to extend the Touchstone range further?

"Absolutely. We just received the first batch of the Country Boys, so we will begin distributing them, I'm going to say, within a month. And there's another model behind that, which we have just approved prototypes for and it will be, again, a dreadnought and an OM.

"We wanted to take a traditional style and dress it up with a few luthier features like wooden bindings and some very simple inlays. The Signature Model will be Madagascar rosewood back and sides and ziricote bindings on the body, neck and headstock. Fairly simple appointments but a little non-traditional. I should add that on top of these models, we also have two new body styles in prototype: one is a slope-shoulder dreadnought and the other one is an L-00 style guitar. So each of these three models will eventually be available in four body sizes. And we'll be expanding beyond that." G

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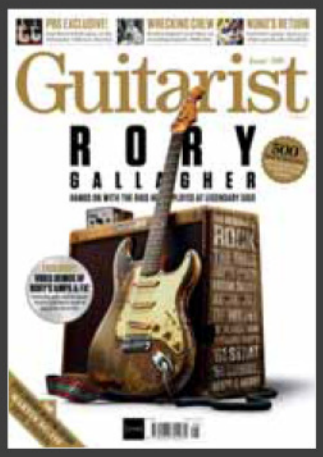

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Role Model

IK Multimedia's Tonex tone-capturing ecosystem expands with a hardware box to take those sounds on stage

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Olly Curtis

IK MULTIMEDIA TONEX PEDAL £399

CONTACT **IK Multimedia** WEB **www.ikmultimedia.com**

What You Need To Know

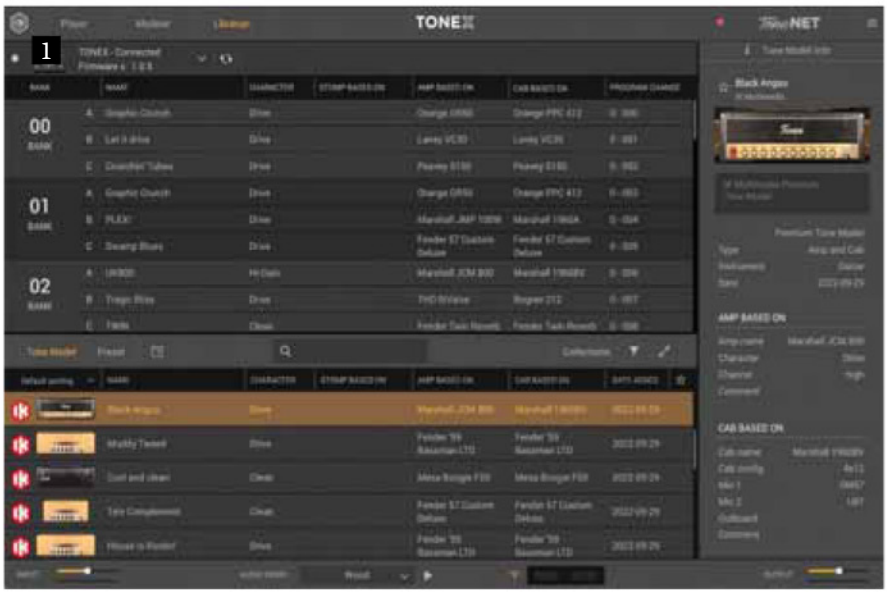
1. **Another amp modeller, then?**
It may be better described as a 'capture player' – IK Multimedia's Tonex Pedal has amp and speaker sounds like an amp modeller, but these are sounds that have been captured or profiled, much like in a Kemper product.

2. **So, it can capture the sound of your own amp?**
Not directly from the pedal, but that process can be carried out with the included Tonex software, and the resulting Tone Models transferred to the pedal.

3. **Does it have effects as well?**
Tonex solely features amps, speaker cabs and dirt pedals, but you do get an onboard compressor, noise gate and reverb.

Most readers of this mag will know IK Multimedia for its AmpliTube amp and effects software and for its X-Gear pedals, which we reviewed back in issue 482. But the company has another software application called Tonex that uses AI machine modelling to capture the sound of amp rigs as something called 'Tone Models'. IK Multimedia recently announced that there are now over 10,000 of these Tone Models available for the platform, either created by the company themselves or by Tonex users. Until now, you could play through Tonex as a standalone application, use it as a plug-in in a DAW or integrate the Tone Models into AmpliTube. But a major game-changer is that the company has now released the Tonex Pedal, which puts Tonex Tone Models into a hardware stompbox that can be used anywhere, just like any amp-modelling pedal.

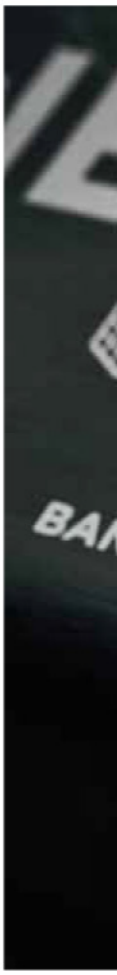
Following the same triple-footswitch format as the X-Gear pedals, the Tonex Pedal comes complete with 150 presets that can be called up by the footswitches. These have been filled by IK Multimedia with some great fully processed and ready-to-use rigs with plenty of tweaking available from its front panel, so it could be used straight out of the box without a computer in sight. However, it is part of the overall Tonex ecosystem and comes complete with the Tonex Max software and AmpliTube 5, so by connecting it to a computer and linking with that Tonex software you'll really maximise its potential. Let's look at that...



1. The Tonex Librarian is where you can easily fill the preset slots on the pedal with what's available – it's a simple drag-and-drop process

THE RIVALS

If we're talking about hardware units that offer captured sounds, then there are two contenders, both of which do that capturing themselves. The newest is the Neural DSP Quad Cortex (£1,649), while Kemper's offerings have been around for a few years now in the Profiling Amp (£1,499) and Profiler Stage (£1,449). We can, of course, also compare the Tonex Pedal's functionality to the various amp modelling and effects processors on the market, such as the Line 6 HX Stomp (£449), Fractal Audio FM3 (£1,225) and HeadRush MX5 (£449), not to forget smaller units including the Strymon Iridium (£399) and Walrus Audio Mako ACS-1 (£399).



2. The Parameter Encoder accesses and edits a set of advanced parameters. It can also be held down to assign the five main knobs to adjust their alternate parameters

3. The USB connection to your computer will not only give you access to the Tonex librarian software for preset management but also allows the pedal to be used as an audio interface

4. The Tonex Pedal offers a pretty standard set of Gain, Bass, Mid, Treble and Volume knobs, but each has a secondary parameter listed below that's accessed by a press-and-hold on the Parameter knob

5. These footswitches offer straightforward functionality in instantly accessing the three presets in each bank and scrolling through the banks (two footswitches pressed simultaneously)

Software

At the heart of the Tonex software is its ability to capture the sound of any rig comprising combinations of amps, cabinets and drive pedals, and you get to choose from five configurations: Amp and Cab, Complex Rig (stomp, amp and cab), Stomp, Amp, and Stomp & Amp. It's a fairly straightforward process whereby the computer sends a signal from your audio interface through a reamping box into your amp, which can be mic'd or have output through. The results are fed back into the computer so the AI can do its work and create a Tone Model.

Starting with that basic Tone Model, you can then create presets with noise gate, EQ, compressor and reverb available to sculpt your sound. Thus, by going through the capture process you can have an accurate version of your own rig. If all that sounds a bit technical, there's loads that have already been created: Tonex Max comes with 1,000 Tone Models, and an internet connection will take you to ToneNET where users can post their own captures (some excellent, some less so) and you can browse through them and download as many as you like. Which brings us back to the pedal...

Hardware

If you connect the pedal to the software you can load the Tone Models and presets into it by drag-and-drop, displacing what's already there. The pedal has a guitar input and mono and stereo output options, plus a headphone out. The presets are stored in 50 banks of three, so you always have the three in any bank instantly available from the three footswitches. Banks can be scrolled through by pressing two footswitches at once. If the three footswitches aren't enough you can have MIDI control and there's also a socket for connecting an expression pedal or a single or double footswitch.

Instantly available for each preset are Gain and Volume knobs plus Bass, Mid and Treble. There's also a Parameter encoder that can be held down to call up a set of instant alternative parameters for the other five knobs, namely Reverb, Compressor, Noise-Gate, Presence and Depth. Deeper functions are also directly available from the Parameter knob, while the Model encoder gets you into menus that allow editing of the Tone Model and also global functions. That's plenty under the hood, but the small display is well designed to let you navigate clearly.

5

IK MULTIMEDIA TONEX PEDAL

PRICE: £399
ORIGIN: Italy
TYPE: Amp modeller pedal
FEATURES: 150 presets, MIDI control, audio interface function, comes with AmpliTube 5 and Tonex Max software
CONTROLS: Model, Preset, Parameter, Gain, Bass, Mid, Treble, Volume, Footswitch A, footswitch B, footswitch C
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard outputs L(Mono) & R, standard headphones output, MIDI IN, MIDI OUT, Ext. Control, USB
POWER: Supplied 9V DC adaptor
DIMENSIONS: 175 (w) x 145 (d) x 57mm (h)

The Tonex Pedal is the missing link that opens up the whole concept to a great many users

Sounds

As shipped, there are presets that are instantly usable in a variety of situations with a host of amps and dirt pedals covered. If you're looking for a whole polished amp/cabinet sound, the compressor keeps things tight and the reverb delivers any ambience you might need with five reverb types to choose from (three springs, room and plate). Both the amp and cab are separate entities within a Tone Model and can be mixed and matched in a preset; the Tone Model's own cabinet can be swapped out for a traditional IR or one of IK Multimedia's VIR (Volumetric Impulse Response) cabinets.

This is a unit with plenty of flexibility for onstage use as an amp or amp/cab substitute or set up on your pedalboard as three instantly accessed drive/distortion/fuzz sounds – single pedals or captured pedal combinations. It is also very practical for recording use with its USB audio interface function, for silent practice via its headphone output, or maybe as an easily portable backup in case of amp malfunctions.

Verdict

The amp modelling pedal in its many forms has provided a practical solution for anybody who is not able to (or doesn't want to) lug bulky amps around when gigging. Of course, for the most part this means you can't use your own amp and have to rely on a generic recreation of it, maybe in a Line 6 or Fractal unit unless you've invested in a machine that can capture the sound of it such as a Kemper or the Neural Quad Cortex, neither of which are bargain basement units.

The beauty of IK Multimedia's Tonex Pedal is that it can give you the sound of your own amp at a very reasonable and much more affordable price and is a particular bargain when you consider you're getting the Tonex Max and AmpliTube 5 software thrown in with it. Until now, the Tonex ecosystem may have been a useful asset for anyone recording and playing guitar through their computer, but this new pedal is the missing link that opens up the whole concept to a great many users. G

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Relatively compact size; an affordable way to 'digitise' your rig and use it live; massive amount of models to choose from; audio interface capability

CONS Some may bemoan the lack of a send/return loop

« BLUEPRINT »

DISTORTING HISTORY

These days, players can choose from hundreds of replacement pickups. But back in the early 70s Larry DiMarzio single-handedly kickstarted the entire industry with his hot-output Super Distortion humbucker. We met NYC's king of tone to find out more

Words Jamie Dickson

Larry DiMarzio doesn't do an awful lot of interviews. Which is a shame because he's one of the most storied and rightly famous pickup makers and tone innovators in the world. Cutting his teeth in the late 60s and early 70s, repairing guitars for the busy and demanding pro guitarists of New York, he soon learned that professional guitarists needed pickups that offered higher performance than the factory units being made by Fender and Gibson at the time. After a stint working for Bill Lawrence, he went on to almost single-handedly invent the mainstream pickup market.

His first foray into designing original pickups yielded the FS-1 – an eponymous 'Fat Strat' pickup designed to correct the tendency of traditional Strat bridge pickups to sound shrill and thin, which was subsequently adopted by players such as David Gilmour of Pink Floyd. But it was his next creation, the fiery but surprisingly versatile Super Distortion humbucker, that really put DiMarzio on the map – and today his pickups are used by everyone from Steve Vai and Satriani to Nita Strauss and Andy Timmons. In a rare one-to-one interview, we ask Larry about his philosophy on getting great tone and learn how the Super Distortion kicked down the door of the 70s guitar scene.

Larry DiMarzio was the originator of the mainstream replacement pickups industry and his designs remain at the cutting edge of the winder's art today

Before you founded DiMarzio, you cut your teeth at New York guitar-repair centre Guitar Lab. You've said that one of the commonest mods you were asked to do was retrofitting Les Paul Deluxes with full-size humbuckers. What was driving that, in your opinion? After all, mini-humbuckers can sound pretty good...

"Most guitar players – the hip guitar players and the guitar-repair people – accepted and recognised the fact that Gibson was not paying attention to what we wanted at that time. Nor Fender, for the most part. Jeff Beck and, in particular, Jimmy Page were playing Les Pauls, so suddenly everyone wanted a Les Paul. So what does Gibson do? Did Jimmy Page's guitar have mini-humbuckers? No! [Laughs] So I would say that on average, we were doing several conversions of mini-humbucker Les Pauls to full-size humbuckers a week during the time I was at the Guitar Lab. We'd take the original out, rout the hole bigger, drop the new humbucker in."

The other in-demand mod back then was removing standard Tele neck pickups and replacing them with full-size humbuckers. How did beefing up factory Fender tones lead to your debut design, the FS-1 'Fat Strat' pickup?

"I remember [Guitar Lab owner] Charlie LoBue was really happy with himself because he had bought a batch of Firebird pickups. Up to then, we had been installing full-size humbuckers in Teles, which were totally mismatched to the bridge pickup. Also, the strings don't line up... But we took the neck pickups out, put humbuckers in, and accepted the fact that it worked – and yet it didn't *really* work. It was a half-solution. And so Charlie was really happy because he'd contacted Gibson and apparently they had a box of old [non-reverse] Firebird pickups that were never installed in guitars because the model was discontinued. So he bought the box of pickups and then we started installing Firebird pickups [in the

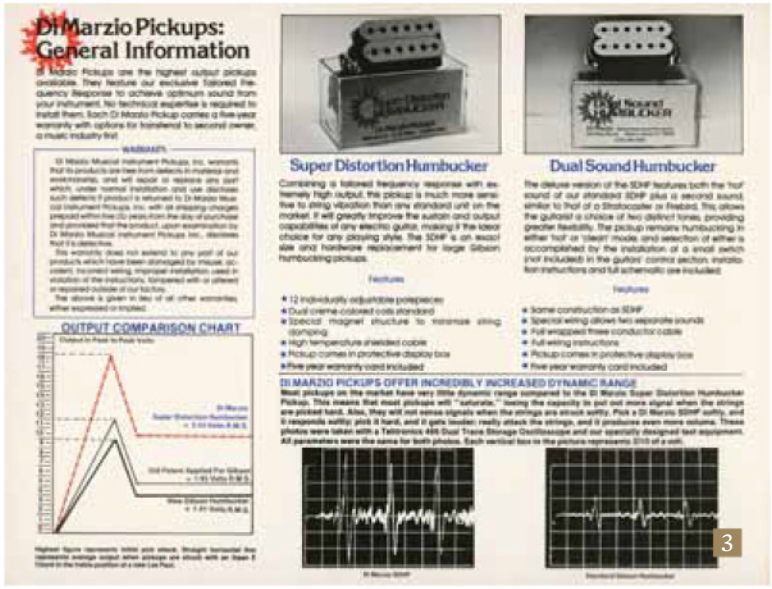
A 1978 Ibanez Artist 2617 with an in-period mod that became very popular and kickstarted the whole replacement pickups industry: a DiMarzio Super Distortion fitted at the bridge position

1. Larry DiMarzio (right) with Jol Dantzig at a Chicago trade show in the 70s, promoting his pickups

2. The original self-built pickup winder Larry DiMarzio used

3. An early DiMarzio catalogue with output comparison graphs

4. The original Super Distortion humbucker prototype, plus Bill Lawrence pickup covers



PHOTOS 1-4 COURTESY OF DIMARZIO

neck position of Teles]. But I didn't like that, either, you know? So there was a lot of experimenting going on. But the typical experiment was to rout a big hole in a guitar and hope for the best.

"Actually, I don't like Tele neck pickups at all – never did. As a matter of fact, when we [in later years] made the Twang King pickup, Steve Blucher was working on the design and I had just come back from Japan, where I was actually seeing an increase in interest in Telecasters. And we had a request from our distributor saying, 'Well, why don't you make a neck pickup?' So Steve Blucher said to me, 'What do you want the next pickup to sound like?' And I said, 'Like a Stratocaster!' But what Steve did was actually better: the Twang King has what I would describe as that elusive, mythical sound that you think you should be getting.

"That said, I always thought the Stratocaster's bridge pickup sounded terrible. Hence, the very first rewinds that I did were to change the sound of that bridge pickup to be warmer and darker – because what I really wanted to do was shift it in the direction of a P-90. I wanted that warmer, bigger, fuller [tone]. That was really the first pickup I designed from the ground up, where it was like, 'I don't want to fix the pickup, I want to *change* the pickup.' Which is the separation between just repairing something and actual design."

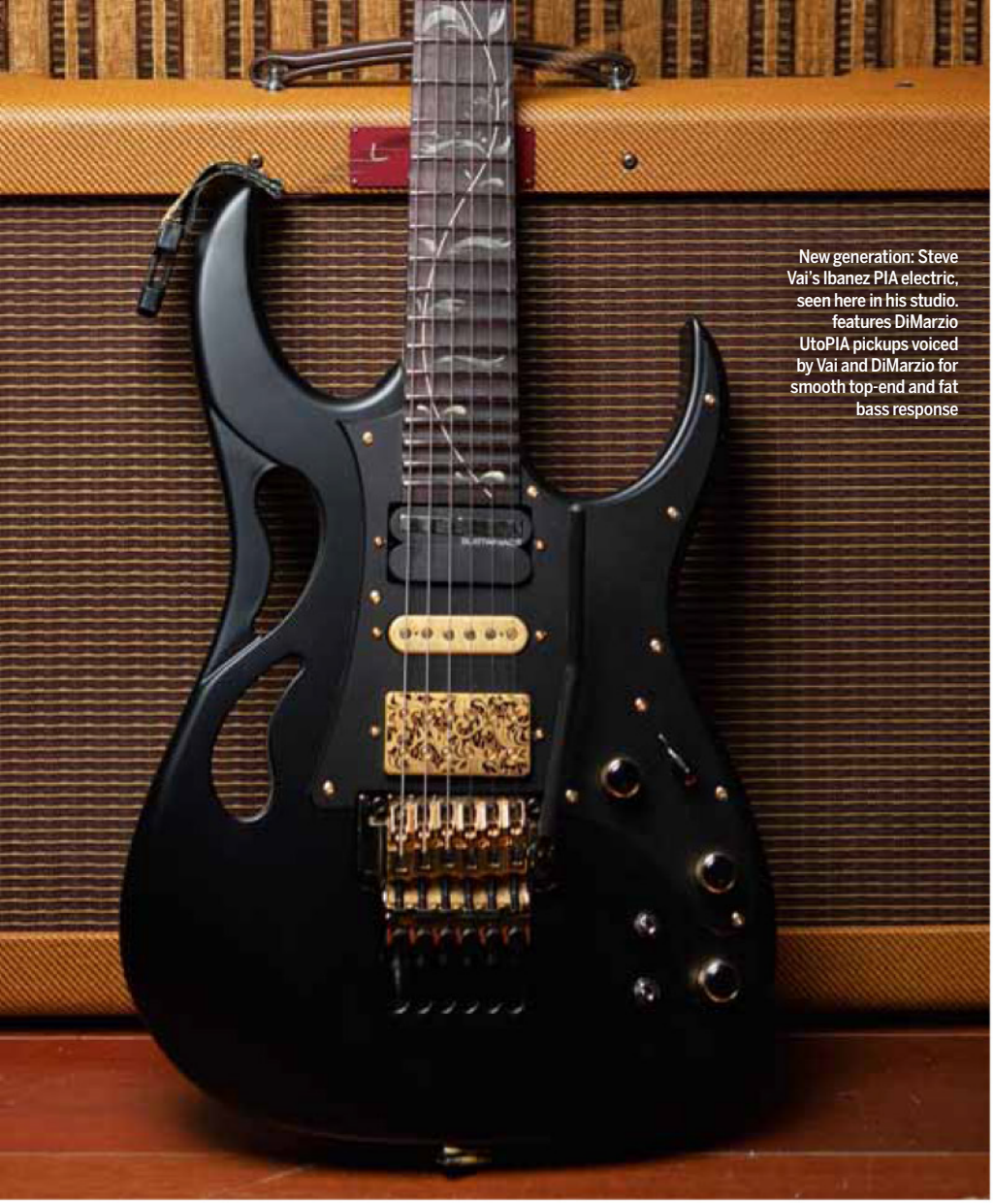
Back in those early days, you repaired an awful lot of pickups. What did you learn while fixing them that influenced your own pickup designs later on?

"One of my theories when I first started the company was that I never wanted a pickup back because it broke, right? So during the thinking and engineering process, I would kind of go a little bit more heavy duty than needed, simply because I would rather build in a safety factor. Even today, when we work with artists they might say to us, 'We're going out on the road – could you send me some guitar straps?' And we're like, 'Oh, yeah, sure. We'll send you out guitar straps. What do you need?' And they might say, 'Well, I need six.' To which we'll reply, 'Well, take nine,' right? And we'll ask them what pickups are in their guitars and what pots they're currently using. Then we'll send them all of that stuff. So my standing joke with roadies is, if you have just *one* of anything in the case [of equipment that we send out], it won't break. So it's about 'How do we make this so it doesn't need repair?' I love things that don't need repair."

You've described how Gibson and Fender failed to grasp what players wanted from the guitars they made during the 70s. In what sort of ways did factory pickups fitted to guitars during that period represent a backwards step, in your view?

"Well, I realised early on that original PAF pickups sounded significantly different to the early 70s and late-60s pickups that we were seeing. For example, one of the things that Gibson had decided to do was make the Alnico magnet shorter. And I'm going to say that was probably a bean-counter decision. Corporations have a tendency to allow the bean-counters to have a little bit too much freedom in my opinion.

"The story that I got – not verified – was that Gibson came out with a Melody Maker that had a bar magnet down the centre of the coil, and they wrapped the coil around that to make a cheap single coil that only used one magnet, okay? And the story that I got is that they decided to use the same Alnico magnet in [both the budget



New generation: Steve Vai's Ibanez PIA electric, seen here in his studio. features DiMarzio UtoPIA pickups voiced by Vai and DiMarzio for smooth top-end and fat bass response

single coils and in standard humbuckers]. So in order to make that work, they shortened the magnet that was used in the regular humbucker."

The DiMarzio Super Distortion was the first high-performance replacement humbucker to hit the market and it has been in demand ever since. What tonal benefits did it offer to guitarists as compared to factory humbuckers made by Gibson and others?
"Well, we made a device called a 'Universal String Plucker'. It looked like something from a child's Erector Set, but it had a guitar pick that swept across the strings and the idea was that the plucking was consistent, right? So we rigged a guitar so that it was being played [by the Universal String Plucker] and then used an oscilloscope and a camera to record the results. In essence, this showed how different pickups performed while being plucked with the same intensity. So you'll see on those graphs that there is an initial peak, then there's a high point and finally there's the sustain.

"So using the Universal Plucker and striking all six strings, the Super Distortion produced 3.54 volts RMS, whereas an old 'Patent Applied For' produced 1.9 volts RMS and then the newer – at that point – 70s humbuckers produced 1.41 volts in our test results. So, again, part of my logic was: if we had a pickup with higher output, it would drive a Fender or Marshall amplifier into distortion. If you wanted to come out of distortion, you just rolled the volume back. And by clipping the front-end of the amp with the higher output of the pickup, the guitar now sustained longer, simply because you had more voltage hitting the front-end of the amplifier.

"I read an article recently [featuring a] Tony Bacon interview with Seth Lover, and Seth Lover talked about the original PAF pickup and how what they really wanted at Gibson was a kind of P-90 sound but quieter. And he came up with the idea of using the two coils to cancel most of the noise, put it in a metal cover, which again is all textbook. He talked very specifically about how the original pickup that he designed had a stainless-steel cover, but they had difficulty attaching that because he wanted to have what I would call an almost 'magnetically invisible' cover. Which didn't happen. And then when you change the plating on the cover... the cover becomes slightly magnetic, which means that you are [leaching] the magnetism away from the strings and dissipating that in the cover, so to speak.

"All of us in the guitar business were taking the covers off pickups anyway. That was the other thing that I did all the time. And again, doing that allows you to raise the pickup up higher and closer to the strings. So all that was just a way of doing exactly what I eventually did [with the Super Distortion], which was to increase the initial output to the amplifier."

When you made the first prototypes of the Super Distortion you used surplus components left over from Bill Lawrence's shop. In your biographical essay *The Birth Of The Super Distortion*, you describe using nails to pack out the space between the improvised magnet you used and the prototype pickup's other components. What effect did that have and how did it influence the onward development of the Super Distortion?
"Well, it changed the iron load of the actual pickup – because there was now more iron. When I was working for Bill Lawrence and he left the 'shop, there were scraps left laying around, including some ceramic magnets. The funny part is I took some of the ceramic magnets, which were not the right size, and installed them in a pickup and liked it better... because the other thing [besides increasing output] that I was doing was tone shaping. If you had a big, loud, bright pickup, I felt it was just annoying. What I really wanted was that singing, 'vocal' quality, especially in the bridge position, you know?

> "What I really wanted was that singing, 'vocal' quality, especially in the bridge position"

"So I built those first pickups with the magnet scraps using iron [to fill a gap]. Then, when I could afford it, I went and bought my own magnets and changed the dimensions of the magnet, then A/B'd the two – and realised I didn't actually like the new, larger magnet! So once again it was like, 'Oh, gee, if I put this in, it should work better.' But, no, when I tried it, I didn't like it.

"The same thing happened with amplifier work. I once built an ultra-linear Fender amplifier from a schematic, making what I thought were improvements to it – and it was a great PA amplifier but an absolutely horrific guitar amplifier. It would *not* break up."

Three contrasting Ibanez Premium electric guitars, all fitted with DiMarzio pickups (from l-r): Joe Satriani signature model JS24P, Steve Vai Universe UV70P seven-string and Strat-like Andy Timmons AT10P model. DiMarzio continues to deliver the sounds that exacting artists need

Great guitar tone often comes from things *not* working with 'perfect efficiency'. But perfect efficiency is at least a clear goal. So how do you identify the elusive design elements that make a pickup or amp sound good to our ears?
"Well, trial and error, error, error – over and over. You keep making mistakes and that kind of teaches you not to do certain things."

The Super Distortion was the first aftermarket pickup of its kind, so how did you get people to take notice of it?
"I used to go around to music stores with my Goldtop Les Paul [fitted with a Super Distortion at the bridge] and I would say to them, 'The neck pickup is always louder, right?' And the store owner would agree. So then I plugged the guitar in, played the neck pickup then switched to the bridge pickup – which was, of course, louder with a Super Distortion – and I'd say, 'Not any more.' And that would sell six pickups...

"An early goal was clearly establishing I'd done something very different from Gibson"

[laughs]. But that was one of the early goals: clearly establishing the fact that I'd done something very different from what Gibson was doing. And when I finally got [a really good, genuine] 1959 Les Paul, it was magnificent... But if I was going to play a gig, I would have taken a guitar that I'd built that had a Super Distortion in the bridge position. It really let me do whatever I wanted to do and you got a very different effect to what a stock Les Paul would give you."

Looking back over the decades since the Super Distortion's launch, how gracefully do you think it has aged as a design? Is it still relevant today, when hundreds – possibly thousands – of hot humbuckers are now available to players?
"Oh, gosh... Oddly enough since we've written *The Birth Of The Super Distortion* article, I've had lots of love mail about how many people got it, love it and still use it and it's their favourite pickup. I'm really proud of the design because it was groundbreaking – still is in many ways – and it's really the pickup that everyone targets: you have guys on YouTube going, 'Well, we compared the Super Distortion to this, this and this...' And you have to realise that basically anyone that's building that kind of product is basing their design work on what I did 50 years ago... In a funny way, it's the 'SM57' of the guitar pickup business. It's got a shit-ton of hits [to its credit]. And it has its own character.

"As a matter of fact, the guitar player who's out with Corey Taylor [Christian Martucci] is a big Super Distortion fan. And when we first met, he just sang the praises of how much he liked recording with that pickup because it just works. I'm like, 'Do you want to try this? Or do you want to try that?' And he's like, 'No, in the bridge position, I really like what this does.' He's now recorded an album with a bunch of different things. But in particular, he's playing a Phantom in the bridge position – which is a modification on a P-90 we've made – but so many of the other recordings that he's doing are all Gibson guitars with Super Distortions in the bridge. So the takeaway, for me, is that it's a good piece of work. It's consistent. I never sold it out. It's never been built in Asia. And the goal was always to keep the brand and the identity clean."

How important has practical input from artists been in shaping what DiMarzio pickups are today?
"You can come up with ideas that you think are good in your design area... and then you still have to take them into the marketplace. I mean, a lot of the pickups were road-tested, not just by me but by my friends. I mean, imagine if you would, it's 1973, KISS is formed and recording, but they're not even out on the road yet. Right? Ace Frehly and I meet up and I give him some pickups because he heard about them. Well, those pickups were out on the road for like a year. Now, if there were problems, I was going to hear about it.

"Another example: Yngwie Malmsteen used the HS-3 pickup because basically he wanted an FS-1 that was quiet. The first version of the FS-1 [we came up with] that was quiet was an HS-3. After going through HS-1 and -2, that was the third version. He road-tested that pickup for about a year, liked it and that was that and he used [it for some time]. So I like the idea of getting a product and road-testing it.

"Corey Taylor's doing worldwide probably for a year, and our Phantom pickups will be out on the road doing a lot of shows. Something either works or it doesn't [in that demanding environment], and the last thing I want to hear is, 'Oh, gee, we had to fix this in the mix.' It should be: plug it in, it sounds right." G

To hear more about the birth of the Super Distortion, visit www.dimarzio.com/stories/birth-super-distortion

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Guitarist

BOUGHT & SOLD

TORA DAHLE AAGÅRD

The Norwegian rocker mourns the theft of her first guitar, while advising fellow players to keep an open mind when buying gear

Tora's Expérience and Elégante (right) signature models are by French guitar maker Marceau

PHOTO BY PER OLE HAGEN

What was the first serious guitar you bought with your own money?

"My first guitar that I bought was actually a Nash guitar. It cost – I'm going to try and convert it from Norwegian to dollars – maybe $1,200? It was a lot of money for me at the time and it actually got stolen after three years. That was heartbreaking. I had just started playing and I thought that I wanted to spend all my money on a guitar. And I thought I should try to have a really good guitar and not the bad one my dad had in his basement! I only listened to Michael Jackson in those days. He's my number one, musically. I'm one of those fans – I know everything about him. But I also discovered John Mayer, so that was my Mayer/Jackson era."

What was the last guitar you bought, and why?

"Actually, I think it was an acoustic guitar. I work with Alvarez and I had one of their guitars and they sent me the second one, a DYM60HD. It's a beautiful guitar. The thing is, I don't play acoustic guitars live, I only use electric. So what I use the acoustic for is basically songwriting on the couch. It's interesting to see how important it is to have a good acoustic guitar when you're writing songs from your heart. And this is a beautiful guitar. It's so rich in sound and so warm. So it really helps me to write good songs. That's the most important thing for me."

> "I'm a smart Norwegian, so I've never sold any of my guitars in case one day I need them!"

What's the most incredible find or bargain you're ever had when buying gear?

"You know, I don't really think I have ever looked for anything that expensive, so I can't give you an answer. But I think my signature guitars are a bargain. I think it's mind-blowing the fact that I have two! They are built by Marceau Guitars and the first one is an S-type and the other is a T-type. They make everything at the workshop, even the pickups, and my name is inlaid on the 12th fret in mother-of-pearl. The necks on both of them are roasted flame maple and they are soft reliced. I want them to look kind of broken in."

What's the strongest case of buyer's remorse that you've ever had after buying a piece of gear?

"When I started out, I was so broke. I was like a desperate musician for many, many years. So everything that I bought, it didn't really matter, I just made it work. I think I had to be positive and say, 'This is what I have, I'm gonna figure it out.' So I've always been happy to have anything that I can play with. But I have experienced

TORA'S LIVE RIG

"It's a very simple rig. I would say 90 per cent of the time, I use a Helix. And I have a [J Rockett] Dude pedal – which is always on – connected to the Helix so that it's in the chain. Then I have a wireless guitar system, a Sennheiser, and that's it for the guitar rig. I try my best to get a decent guitar sound with the Helix. I'm still trying to get better at it and it's starting to sound okay. Then I have my two signature guitars. So it's an easy rig. We travel a lot, so I need it to be portable. So two guitars in the Mono bag and the Helix bag in the suitcase. I try to keep it as simple as I possibly can."

seeing something online and then going and *not* buying it and still regretting it to this day. I've had moments like that, but not anything that I bought that I regret. I like everything that I have."

Have you ever sold a guitar that you now intensely regret selling?

"I'm a smart Norwegian, so I have never sold anything [laughs]. I know that guitar players are usually very into gear and stuff and sell things, but my apartment is full up because I don't sell anything. I'm just saving everything in case maybe one day I need it. I have, I'm guessing, maybe 12 guitars and amplifiers, effects pedals and things like that as well. For the past two years I've been using a [Line 6] Helix, so I haven't been using an amp for a while. I used to have a Fender Blues Junior at home that I really loved. I used it a lot for practising. I also had a Boss amp, but now I don't have an amp at all. There's no space."

What's your best guitar-buying tip?

"I would imagine that you get a lot of the same answers here, but I would think that it's to stop caring about what is cool and what is expected of you to use. I have had a lot of very cheap guitars over the years and I just learned to become best friends with them. And, to be honest, I think that maybe I have had moments where I got the best tone on the cheapest guitar because I spent so much time with them. So it's about being patient and open to trying things from brands that you didn't know about. There are so many talented people out there who make so many amazing things. So I think what I would say is just be open to anything and try as much as you can before buying anything."

If forced to make a choice, would you rather have a really good guitar and a cheap amp or a cheap guitar and a top-notch amp?

"As I've said, because I've played a lot of very cheap guitars and have been able to make them sound the way I want them to, I think I would choose an expensive amp and a cheaper guitar. Because if the amp sucks ass, you're fucked. That's my opinion. I think I'm capable of making a cheap guitar sound decent, but if the amp is totally off, I can't fix that."

If you could only use humbuckers or single coils for the rest of your career, which would it be and why?

"I've actually never owned a guitar with humbuckers so I'm definitely going to say single coils. It's kind of weird because I like a deeper sound. I always turn the treble down to, like, 3 on the amp, so it's weird that I really haven't been using humbuckers. But Marceau and I are working on something, so I think very soon I will have a humbucker in my house. But to answer your question, single coils." **[DM]**

Tora's latest album, *Seventeen*, is available now via Touchdown Music. The band is on tour in the UK this September. See the website for details **www.thisistora.com**

Tora's T- and S-style guitars have so far kept her firmly in the single-coil camp. But an imminent new build will see her incorporate humbuckers into her arsenal for the first time soon

PHOTO BY PER OLE HAGEN

The MOD SQUAD

RUBBER SOUL

Bucking every opinion on eking the last bit of sustain and tone from your guitar, the latest trend in guitar 'design' is the rubber bridge. The what? Dave Burrluck investigates…

Many years ago, I remember finding out that Gibson used nylon for its top nuts and thinking, 'Hang on, that's not going to work.' But, of course, so long as you use the right blend – not an easy material to work with compared with bone – it certainly does. I inherited a friend's Ibanez semi that had a TonePros tune-o-matic with nylon saddles and, again, the guitar sounds really good and I have no plans to change it. But materials that have direct contact with the string, not least the bridge saddle, are central to the whole way a guitar works in its seemingly simple but actually rather complex manner – and that goes for whether they might be regular or more unusual materials.

Today's thinking? Well, for electric guitars' bridges and saddles, steel and brass are kings and there are plenty of other options: harder and brighter-sounding materials such as stainless steel or tungsten, for example, or softer metals like aluminium, not to mention modern synthetics including that aforementioned nylon or Graph Tech's proprietary material it uses for its String Saver saddles (and slippery nuts). Then, of course, there are wooden bridges (typically rosewood or another hard wood) used on jazz semis and archtops and back in the day; Danelectro and Dan Armstrong used rosewood for their one-piece bridge saddles, too. So, within a hardness range, there's actually quite a bit of choice when it comes to bridge saddle material.

But a *rubber* bridge? Well, it does have some history – think about those string mutes (mechanical palm-muting, if you like) on a Fender Jaguar or Bass VI. And as with most materials there are plenty of different alloys, or in this case blends, from very soft foam rubber to a hard rubber. In certain circles, the rubber bridge guitar is becoming quite a thing. 'Not in my bloomin' circles!' you might be thinking, but you won't know until you try it. So, what should you expect?

The rubber trend seems to have been started by Reuben Cox, owner of the Old Style Guitar Shop in LA, who specialises in transforming low-dollar instruments into something new, including adding a rubber-bridge. According to GuitarWorld.com, his budget transformations have attracted artists from "The National to Phoebe Bridgers and Jackson Browne ... [who are] mostly in pursuit of the unique and beautiful tone wrung from those rubber bridge builds. His instruments have permeated indie music, passing through the hands of the world's biggest artists and cropping up on albums from the likes of Bob Dylan and Taylor Swift." Head over to YouTube to check out numerous tutorials, and if you search for a playlist on Spotify named 'Rubber Bridge Guitars' you might well become entranced with the short-sustaining, almost other-worldly voices these various rubber-bridge guitars bring.

The 'old sound' can be further enhanced by using flat-wound strings, and because we're talking specifically about electric here (not acoustic), a pretty high-output pickup (not a low-output PAF-alike) is suggested, presumably to compensate for the reduced energy of the rubber-damped strings. If you're after an even more lo-fi flavour, you could try one of those circular piezo discs wired to its own output.

Rubber Choice

The material itself has quite a backstory, but it's important to note that we're talking synthetic rubber here, not the natural latex that comes from the rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis*), found mainly in South America, that has been used for centuries. So would an everyday rubber eraser work for an electric guitar bridge? Well, you can buy rubber erasers in numerous different sizes and, although the composition might vary, it's potentially quite well suited; while it's firm with little compression, it's easy to shape with a sharp Stanley knife. There's probably a good marketing angle here: get a car-obsessed rockstar to endorse a range of rubber bridges hewn from the tyres of a '68 Chevy, for example...

> "You might well become entranced with the short-sustaining voices these bridges bring"

Sold as a jeweller's bench mat, our block of rubber is about to become part of a musical instrument

PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK

Back down to earth, one seemingly popular choice is a jeweller's bench mat. This is used to absorb the shock when striking metals and also minimises noise and vibration, so it is presumably a harder type of rubber. I order a block that's 100mm square and 20mm deep from Amazon (pic 1).

Geometry plays an important part in how any guitar sounds and, with counter-intuitive thinking in mind, we're probably looking for less back angle behind the bridge to whatever the anchor point is. Standard Strats or Teles probably aren't our best stop then, although a Les Paul – or any guitar with a tune-o-matic and stud tailpiece – might work as you can raise the height of the stud tailpiece to reduce the pressure over what would be your rubber-no-matic replacement. A guitar with a Jazzmaster-style vibrato would work, too (probably not the vibrato bit), but the often lower string

As ever, our rubber bridge makeover is completely reversible if it turns out this experiment isn't for you

2. Marking out the piece of the block we need for our bridge

3. With the rubber on a sawing block, you can cut to size with a tenon saw and some elbow grease

4. Once cut, the rubber is easy to smooth with some coarse abrasive paper

5. After laying out the string spacing, the string grooves can be marked with a pencil

angle would suit our vague plan. If you're thinking of this route, Waterslide Guitars actually offers a neat-looking bridge with rubber saddles for your Jazzmaster/Jaguar for around £70. Also, a Danelectro with that adjustable rosewood might be good, just replace the wood with a slice of rubber, and a guitar with a trapeze tailpiece is definitely on the cards as it might also suit the 'older' style sound we're expecting. Choices!

Get To Work

With no experience of the rubber bridge concept, it's not clear where to start, but I really don't want to muck up a perfectly good guitar in the pursuit of research. A cheapo Silvertone 1423 suits the old-style aesthetic and since it's fitted with a tune-o-matic and trapeze tailpiece I can at least get the party started. The G string sits around 18mm from the flat top, so this might work with the dimensions of my rubber block. At this stage, I'm not thinking about 100 per cent accurate intonation; I just want to see if the basic concept is worth pursuing (pic 2).

6. The actual grooves can be lightly cut into the top with a needle file – it's like starting an oversized top nut

7. Having marked the approximate saddle positions from the original tune-o-matic, I pare away the rubber under each string groove with a StewMac nut file

8. With the rubber bridge in place and strings back to tension, I start my initial 'setup' using a thinner needle file

9. Apart from needing a bit of a dust, the rubber bridge Silvertone is ready for action

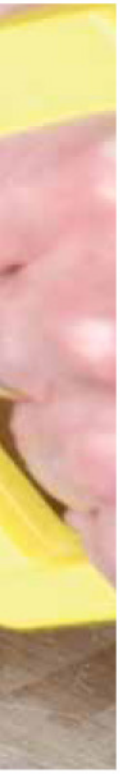
> "This is a completely reversible mod that cost me £6 and introduced me to plenty of artists"

While cutting the block isn't difficult as such, the cloying non-slip nature of the material does require some elbow grease and patience, even with a standard small backed tenon saw that rips though wood easily (pic 3). You can then tidy it up with coarse glass paper – I'm using aluminium oxide, which is easily available from any hardware store (pic 4).

I consider adding a slight radius to the top surface (approximately 12 inches to match the fingerboard), but then realise I can easily cut the string slots to depth and/or sand a radius at a later stage as I dial in the setup. Using a piece of masking tape on either side of the bridge, I mark it with a Sharpie to give me the approximate positions of the original bridge's intonated saddles. Before I remove the tune-o-matic, I measure the approximate position of each saddle in relation to the top E string saddle, too.

I'm working blind here as, quite frankly, I don't know what I'm doing. For example, I mark (pic 5) and then lightly cut the string grooves (pic 6) with a small three-corner needle file on the top of the bridge before

PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK



I realise that if I'm going to angle the bridge to get the basic intonation correct, those slots won't follow the line of the strings. To be honest, I don't even know if I *need* string slots because of the nature of the rubber and the string tension. Using those measurements I took from the original tune-o-matic, I pare away the rubber at the front of the bridge under all but the top E to create my intonation compensation (pic 7). My rubber bridge isn't exactly a looker (I hope Trev Wilkinson isn't reading this!): it looks like an oversized top nut, but it should work. Let's see.

I slacken strings, remove the metal tune-o-matic and its ferrules, which hold it in place, to give me a flat surface. I put the rubber bridge in place then retune and set the bridge so it sort of lines up with those Sharpie marks. Even in this basic state, you can hear the 'plunky' sound concept. But the strings are a little high, especially on the treble side, so with a StewMac string height gauge and a thinner needle file (pic 8) I lower each string to around 1.8mm (0.07 inches), a bit like rough-cutting a top nut, really. The string tension holds the bridge in place (pic 9) and the nature of the material means it doesn't slip on the gloss poly finish. It also means if you want to further tailor your rubber creation, then it's dead easy to slip it out and reshape or re-sand. It's the low-tech version of Relish's fabulous pickup-swapping concept. Well...

But this is also prototype #1. Is the rubber I've used too hard or too soft? Is the bridge too big and wide? Would a thinner piece of rubber affect the sound? Bearing in mind the low cost and pretty fast fabrication of this project, not to mention the easy fit, those are questions you could experiment with easily. In the meantime...

Rubber Sounds

Okay, so the note sustain is considerably reduced, but, surprisingly, it's not as dead as if you were to firmly palm-mute. It seems to push the fundamental vibration of each string and note – not dissimilar to a *pizzicato* technique on a violin or cello, or a muted old archtop. If you're looking for a really old guitar sound, with years-old strings, here it is. It's a vivid antidote to the pristine modern digital world.

Plug into a basic pedalboard, however, and you have a very different driver: tremolo, big reverbs and long spatial delays create other-worldly soundscapes; tapped and timed delays can sound like you're playing an electric kalimba, if such a thing exists. And if your song needs some short and sharp fuzzed riffage, you can tick that box, too.

If the rubber-bridge world isn't for you, then this is a completely reversible mod that cost me £6, cheaper than a London pint. But along the way it also introduced me to plenty of artists that weren't on my playlists. It gets you thinking that other materials might suit this lo-fi vibe, too, such as a simple softwood bridge, perhaps with a non-slip rubber base, which could just as easily be made in the same way with simple hand tools on your work table. Vive la révolution! G

That should give you something to think about till our next issue. In the meantime, if you have any modding questions, or suggestions, drop us a line – The Mod Squad.

Huw Price's **Nitty Gritty**

Relatively little is known about these popular pickups, and not all were created equal…

Gold Foil Pickups

What is a Gold Foil pickup exactly? Unfortunately, there is no straightforward answer because the only feature common to all Gold Foil pickups is a layer of textured-foil covered paper or cloth beneath cut-out metal covers. It serves no sonic purpose and is merely there to smarten up the look and keep dirt, sweat and debris away from the coil.

'Gold Foil' is really just a catch-all term for a range of pickups that often differ significantly in looks, construction and tone. They weren't all produced by the same company and vintage examples were made in the US and Japan simultaneously and independently. As a result, there is much confusion about Gold Foils, compounded by relatively little in the way of historical documentation. Hot on the heels of our review of Fender's new Gold Foil Telecaster (see page 8), we decided it was an opportune moment to take a deep dive down the Gold Foil rabbit hole.

Toledo Gold

During the 1950s in Toledo, Ohio, a company called Rowe Industries was manufacturing guitar pickups under the brand name DeArmond. In the early days of amplification, its pickups were often designed to be retrofitted to non-electric guitars. It also supplied pickups for guitar manufacturers to install in their factories. Until 1957, Gretsch used DeArmond's high-end Dynasonics but became concerned that the Gretsch brand could be tainted by DeArmond's lowlier offerings, which featured on various budget Harmony and Silvertone models. From the late 50s, these pickups were often the types that are now known as Gold Foils.

It's a generic term because not all DeArmond Gold Foils were created equal. The chrome-plated covers were cut out in various patterns that have since acquired the nicknames Diamond-Grille, Moustache and S-Grille. The reasons are obvious when you look at them. Although gold paper foil was usually placed under the covers, DeArmond also used silver and black foil. Pickups featuring the latter became known as Blackjacks or Black Foils.

DeArmond used 44 and 45 AWG magnet wire for the coils, which is thinner than the 42 AWG wire typically used by Gibson and Fender, and harder to wind because of its delicate nature. The smaller gauge also has a higher resistance, so comparing DeArmond Gold Foils like for like with the DCR specs of more conventional pickups can be misleading. DeArmonds reading above around 9kohms probably have 45 AWG wire and you shouldn't assume that equates to a hot output or a dark tone.

S-Grille and Diamond-Grille DeArmond magnets did vary, but most were ferrite or ceramic and were not always rubberised. In contrast, DeArmond used rubberised ceramic magnets for the Moustache DeArmond and, according to Marc Ransley of Mojo Pickups, the magnets were tapped so the pole screws would go through the magnets themselves.

A Rowe-made DeArmond Gold Foil on Adrian Utley's 60s Harmony H-54 Rocket

'Gold Foil' is a catch-all term for a range of pickups that often differ significantly in looks, construction and tone

Since rubberised ceramic magnets are fairly soft, the threads would often wear and the pole screws would fall out. This is similar to the type of magnet used for flexible fridge door magnets. The coils were wound around the magnets, so there was no need for a conventional bobbin. Matt Bascetta of House Of Tone describes the rubberised ferrite magnets as having "a smoother, fuller and warmer response than ceramic".

Tokyo Gold

It's hard to believe nowadays, but there was a time when 'Japanese guitar' was a pejorative term. In the 50s and 60s, electric guitars from Japan tended to be cheap, mass-produced and almost parodic of

Another of Adrian Utley's instruments, this Silvertone Bobkat features dual Gold Foils that the guitarist refers to as "savage"

American designs. Teisco was one of the biggest brand names, and although some of its guitars looked amazing and were decent enough to inspire a cult following, most agree the pickups were their best feature.

There is some debate about which Gold Foil came first – the DeArmond or the Teisco. It has been claimed that Gold Foils appeared on Teisco guitars as early as 1954, but we haven't been able to corroborate that and the early examples we have seen appear to have gold sparkle plastic under the covers, rather than foil. They are also quite different in shape and size to Teisco's later versions.

But that isn't the salient point because significant distinctions between American and Japanese Gold Foils suggest that they were developed independently and the use of gold foil was largely coincidental or simply expedient. To complicate things further, there are various types of Teisco Gold Foil. But the most popular and copied version is the pickup Ry Cooder has in the neck position of his sunburst Coodercaster.

This Gold Foil can be identified by a row of tiny pole screws running along one side of the cover with six 'dummy' holes punched into the cover along the other side and two oval cutouts. At first glance you might suspect that it's a mini-humbucker, but there's just one coil with its centre line corresponding with two rivets. The 44AWG coil is wrapped around a rubberised ceramic bar magnet, and since the pole screws are separated from the coil, many assume they're mostly for show and serve no practical purpose. However, the magnet rests on a steel baseplate, which also accommodates and therefore magnetises the pole screws.

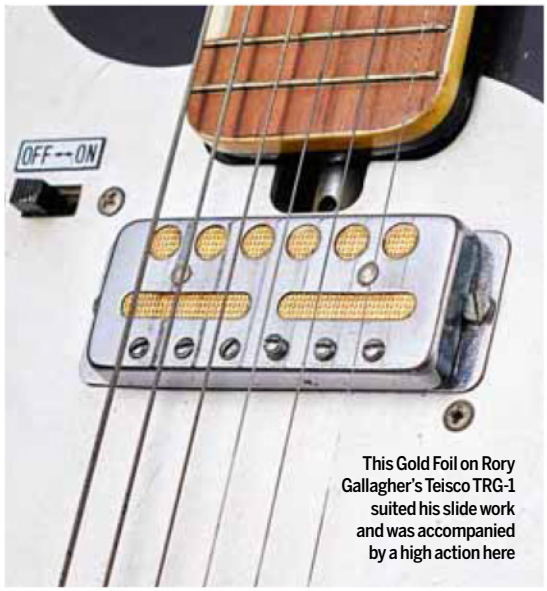
The pole screws don't have as much tonal influence as those in a PAF-style humbucker or P-90, but they can help to balance out the strings. Since their polarity is opposite to the upside of the coil magnet, it's claimed they help to make this particular Teisco Gold Foil quieter than most single-coil pickups.

Another type of Gold Foil that is commonly attributed to Teisco may not have been made by this company after all. It's the version with the pole screws arranged along the cover's centre line and the round and oval holes positioned on each side. According to authors Craig Campbell and Frank Meyers in a 2017 article for Reverb.com, these Gold Foils were actually manufactured by another Japanese guitar company called Zen-On. This version has two bar magnets – either rubberised ceramic or Alnico – with 44 AWG magnet wire and a plastic bobbin. The dual-magnet arrangement is similar to a P-90, but P-90 magnets are placed under the coil. In this Gold Foil, the magnets are positioned adjacent to the coil.

Guyatone Gold

Guyatone Gold Foils were also made in Japan and are somewhat rarer and scarcer than the DeArmonds and Teisco versions. According to Marc Ransley, they were made in-house by Guyatone (Tokyo Sound) for use on Guyatone guitars using different magnets and wire to the Teiscos. Highly regarded and a favourite of UK slide maestro Ramon Goose, it's the unit Guyatone fitted to its semi-acoustic SG model guitar. The pickup is relatively large with a square cornered cover, a rectangular cutout to display the foil and a row of pole screws along one edge.

A narrower Guyatone Gold Foil pickup with an 'N' pattern cover cutout also featured on Guyatone-manufactured Tulio guitars. Marc Ransley tells us these were "the original Japanese Gold Foil, visually inspired by the US- made DeArmonds and designed by Rihei Takashima for the



This Gold Foil on Rory Gallagher's Teisco TRG-1 suited his slide work and was accompanied by a high action here

Players such as Ry Cooder and David Lindley revered the extreme clarity and detail of Teisco Gold Foil pickups

St Vincent's Goldie signatures from Music Man include a trio of Gold Foil pickups

PHOTO BY RUNE HELLESTAD- CORBIS/ CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

This Lollar Gold Foil, monuted here like a soapbar P-90 on a Nik Huber Rietbergen, is made with 44-gauge wire that's wound around a rubberised ferrite magnet

Fujigen Gakki factory". Their output is lower than other Gold Foils and they had six pole screws running along the edge with a coil wrapped around a ceramic magnet.

Buying Gold

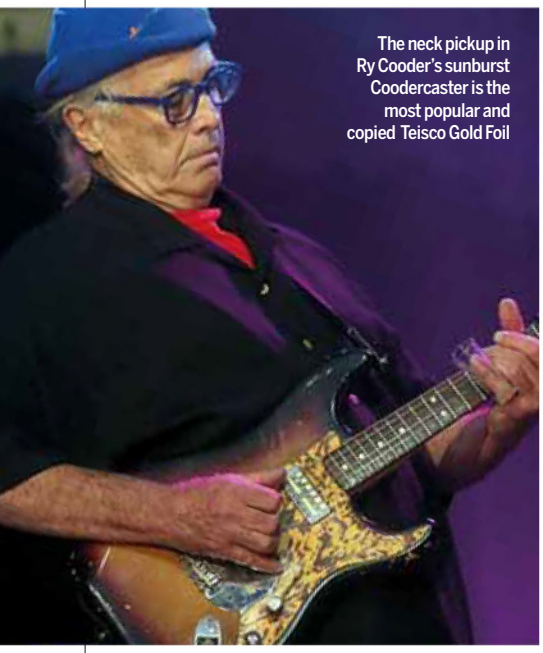
Since these pickups were made by various companies to different designs, it stands to reason that you can hear a range of Gold Foil tones. This is important to understand if you're considering buying a guitar that's equipped with Gold Foils or retrofitting Gold Foils into a guitar.

The American-made DeArmond Gold Foils are considered to have a fuller tone, with fatter mids. Some liken them to a P-90 with a more chime-y and open treble response. Ramon Goose describes them as more rock 'n' roll-sounding than Teiscos and reports that they're great with overdriven amps and fuzzboxes. If you're into Dan Auerbach, St Vincent and Jack White, then DeArmond-style Gold Foils are probably your best option.

In contrast, both types of Teisco Gold Foil are characterised by scooped mids, clear bass and sparkling treble with complex harmonic overtones. Players such as Ry Cooder and David Lindley revered their extreme clarity and detail, and considered them superb for clean tones. Ramon Goose describes them as being slightly thinner-sounding with overdrive than DeArmonds but still very cool.

Ramon actually prefers the larger Guyatone Gold Foils because he finds them slightly fuller-sounding than the famous Coodercaster Teisco. He also finds that flat-wound strings team up nicely with Japanese Gold Foil pickups. If you want to hear a variety of Gold Foils in action, it's worth checking out Ramon's YouTube channel.

PHOTO BY GARY MILLER/GETTY IMAGES



The neck pickup in Ry Cooder's sunburst Coodercaster is the most popular and copied Teisco Gold Foil

The Vintage Gold Foils in this Supro Jamesport are 'pole-less', creating a pickup that senses the strings no matter where they are

Due to the surge of interest, there's no shortage of modern Gold Foils, from vintage reissues to inspired pickups

Years ago, going Gold Foil meant putting up with the often less than stellar build quality of downmarket vintage American and Japanese guitars, or yanking out the pickups to install in guitars with superior playability. But due to the surge of interest, there's no shortage of modern Gold Foils available. You can choose accurate vintage reissues or a whole range of Gold Foil-inspired pickups that are designed as drop-in replacements for humbuckers, P-90s, Strats, Teles, Jazzmasters and more. With no routing or pickguard modifications necessary, it has never been easier to go gold.

In the UK there's no safer bet than Mojo Pickups and its extensive range of Gold Foils. The company even offers replicas of both types of Guyatone as well as more DeArmond and Teisco-inspired versions. In the US, Curtis Novak makes a similarly extensive Gold Foil collection, but many pickup manufacturers now offer one or two options.

However, Ramon Goose makes the interesting point that vintage Gold Foils are no more expensive than the reissue units – and sometimes even cheaper. Some prefer the original Gold Foils, but buying cheaply made vintage pickups isn't risk-free and you might have to try several before you find a really good one. G

With thanks to Marc Ransley (mojopickups.co.uk), Matt Bascetta (houseoftonepickups.com) and Ramon Goose (youtube.com/RamonGoose)

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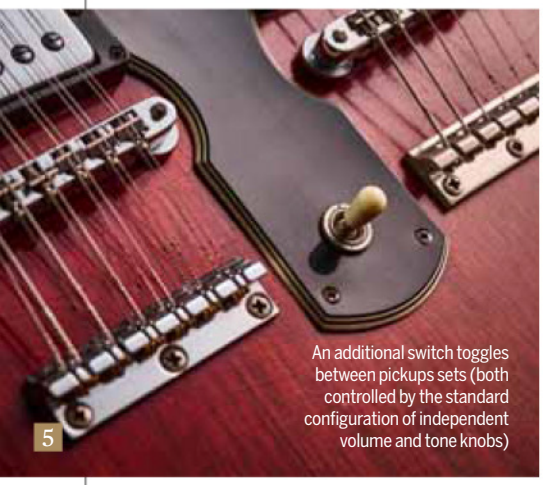
Rod Brakes' Classic Gear

A favourite of Jimmy Page, this double-neck eventually came into its own in the 70s

Gibson EDS-1275

"Beethoven described the guitar as a 'miniature orchestra' – but he never had the opportunity to hear or play the modern Gibson Harp-guitar," says the firm's 1923 catalogue. 100 years ago, this obscure hybrid instrument may have appeared modern, but double-neck guitars were, in fact, around long before Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827). Electric Spanish-style double-neck guitars were, however, a novelty when players such as Joe Maphis and Jimmy Bryant were using them in the 1950s. Subsequently, interest began to grow and in response to numerous requests for these unconventional instruments Gibson developed a pair of dual-necked electric guitars in 1957: the Double 12 and Double Mandolin.

Unveiled at the July 1957 NAMM Show, these rare, custom-order thinlines were constructed with a carved/arched spruce top and laminated maple back and sides. Sporting pointed/Florentine double-cutaways, the profile of these guitars is akin to the mahogany SG solidbody design introduced in the early 60s via the Les Paul range, and it's clear to see where the inspiration for this iconic shape lies. Loaded with Gibson's new PAF humbucking pickups, the Double 12 and Double Mandolin were offered in a choice of Sunburst, Solid White and Solid Black finishes. While both instruments were fitted with a regular 24 ¾-inch scale-length neck in the lower position, the Double 12 features a 12-string neck, whereas the Double Mandolin incorporates a shorter-scale six-string neck tuned an octave higher than standard.



An additional switch toggles between pickups sets (both controlled by the standard configuration of independent volume and tone knobs)

5

Shipping figures show demand for both was relatively low; only 17 Double 12s and 15 Double Mandolins were sent out in 1958 – the highest totals in any year of production. Nonetheless, it further showed Gibson had the ability to design and create novel instruments for the more adventurous guitarist. In '58, they made an intimidating addition to the line-up alongside the newly introduced ES-335, EB-2, double-cutaway Les Paul TV/Junior, Flying V and Explorer. Reads the Gibson catalogue: "A completely new and exciting instrument... The Double 12 combines the conventional six-string guitar neck with a 12-string neck... The Florentine double-cutaway design provides easy access to the entire fret range of both necks."

Easy access to the upper frets was of paramount importance to Gibson during the late 50s and early 60s, as shown in the slew of now classic guitar designs

> Gibson had the ability to design and create novel instruments for the more adventurous guitarist

that appeared within those few short years. In keeping, the single-cutaway Les Paul solidbodies transitioned to the Florentine double-cutaway SG-style, beginning with the Standard in late 1960 and followed by all other models in the range the following year. In a similar vein, the Double 12 was reworked into the SG-style solid-mahogany body EDS-1275 in 1962, as was its Double Mandolin sibling (by this stage designated the EMS-1235). Highlighted on the price list as "Special Order – Custom Instrument Department", they appeared alongside a further variant, the Cherry Red Fuzz-tone-equipped EBSF-1250 Double Bass six-string/four-string bass double-neck.

Solidbody versions proved even less popular than the original thinlines and shipping records reveal scant numbers. Discontinued by the late 60s, the EDS-1275 was reintroduced in the mid-70s and proved significantly more popular thanks to players such as Jimmy Page, Don Felder and Steve Howe.

The Evolution of the Gibson EDS-1275

1957
Gibson Double 12; carved/arched spruce top; maple back and sides

1958 to 1967
110 shipped (Double 12/EDS-1275)

1959
1275 designation

1962
EDS-1275; SG-style mahogany solidbody

Late 60s
Discontinued

Mid-70s
Reintroduced

1974 to 1979
1,145 shipped

Current
Custom Shop EDS-1275 Doubleneck; Cherry Red finish

1966 Gibson EDS-1275

1. SERIAL NUMBER
Six-digit number on upper-rear of 12-string headstock

2. HEADSTOCKS
Mother-of-pearl Gibson logos; black nitrocellulose finish

3. PLASTICS
White keystone tuner buttons (12-string); two b/w 'bell' truss rod covers (engraved 'custom'); two multiple-ply (b/w) bevelled-edge pickguards; four black pickup surrounds; two white switch tips; four metal cap bonnet knobs (two volume/two tone); black control cavity cover

4. HARDWARE
Chrome-plated: four pickup covers, two Tune-o-matic bridges, two tailpieces, six Grover tuners (replacements); 12 Kluson Deluxe tuners; three metal strap buttons

5. PICKUPS & ELECTRONICS
Neck selector switch (middle); four humbuckers; four pots (two volume/two tone); two tone capacitors; three-way pickup selector switch; front-mounted jack

6. BODY
Solid mahogany; 16 inches wide; 1 5/16 inches deep; contoured edges; pointed double-cutaways; cherry nitrocellulose finish

7. NECKS
Mahogany; 24 ¾-inch scale length; bound rosewood fingerboard; 20 frets; double-parallelogram inlays; cherry nitrocellulose finish

Guitarist would like to thank ATB Guitars in Cheltenham for showing us this fantastic guitar from the Bernie Marsden Collection

Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks

Open-String Blues

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Knaggs SSC & Vox AC15 C1
Difficulty ★★★☆☆ | 10 mins per example

WHEN IMPROVISING BLUES licks and solos, most of us would have to admit that, from time to time (or perhaps more often than that), we call upon on 'stock' phrases at will and vary these to fit over different chords, tempos and even styles if we go so far as to take things like tone/amp settings into consideration. The idea behind these four examples is to give a few ideas to incorporate into your internal 'library'. I've chosen to use lots of open strings in the key of E as this sounds classic and allows you to create a complete-sounding blues piece without having to rely on a backing track, even though one is included here.

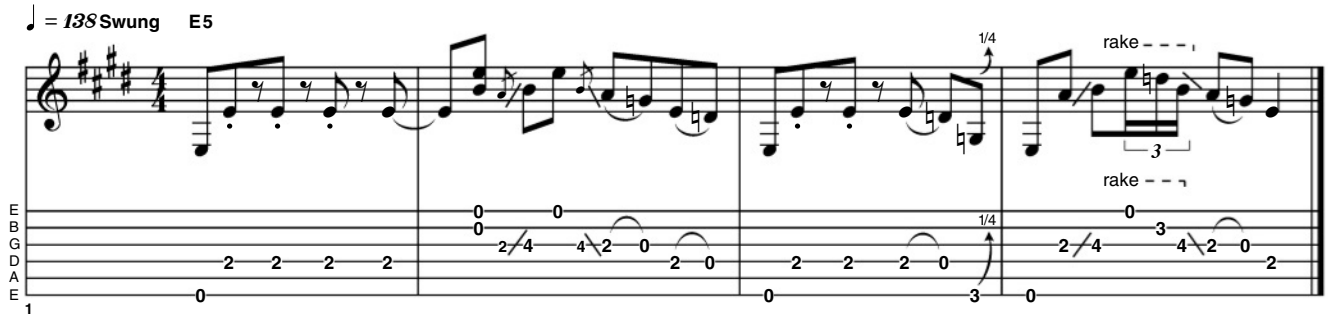
Some aspects of these ideas will survive the transition into other keys, but that might be something to discuss another day. My initial plan was to go very traditional, in the John Lee Hooker or Howlin' Wolf/Hubert Sumlin school of thought, but plugging into the studio's Vox AC15 set slightly louder than that was too much fun to ignore – and reminded me of 'Beano'-era Clapton covering Freddie King's *Hideaway*, so things spiralled from there!

Purely from a playing point of view, this isn't so different from the original plan. However, you can tell there is more sustain and thickness available for higher register playing and/or single-note lines, so it was interesting to realise this by way of following in the footsteps of Clapton (and many others). It's a bit like re-enacting the moment when blues-rock guitar was born! You could stick all these ideas together to make one solo, but they were actually conceived as separate phrases – some fresh patterns for the fingers to try out and ideas to internalise and expand your vocabulary. I hope you enjoy them and see you next time. G

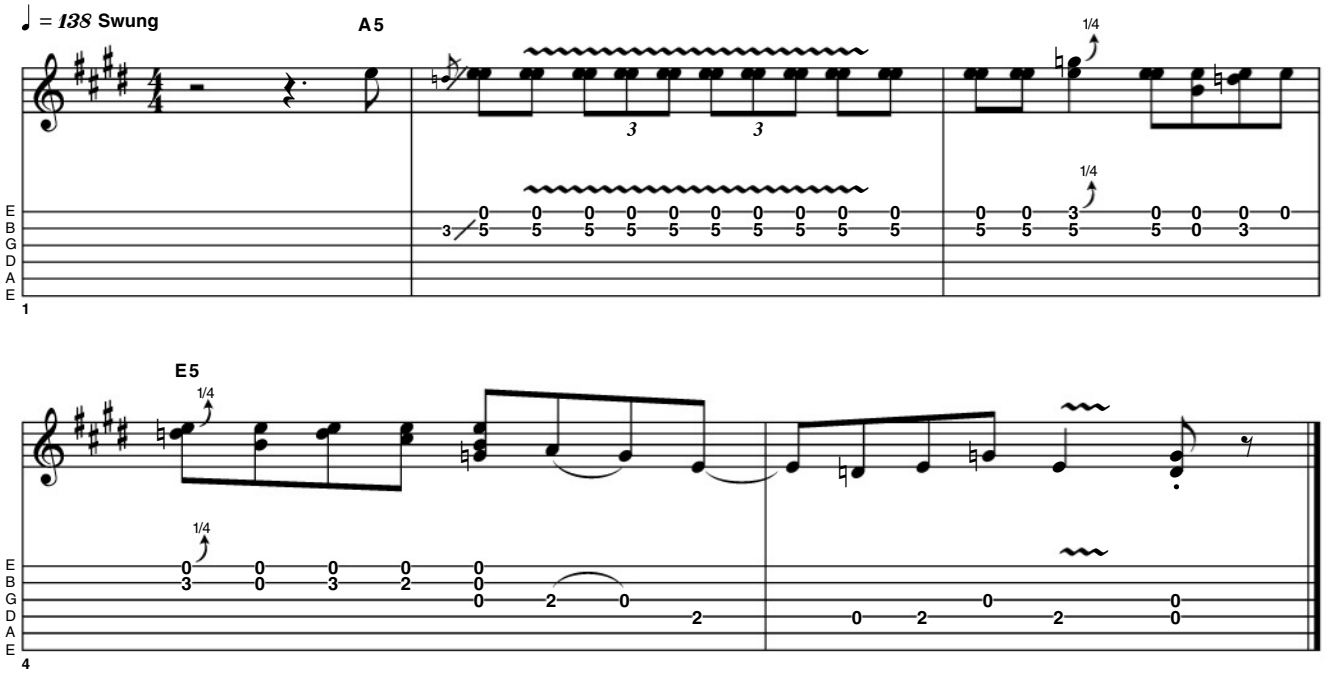
Richard Barrett's album, *Colours*, (complete with backing tracks), is available now from ***www.richardbarrettguitar.com***

Hubert Sumlin's style is still an influence today

Example 1

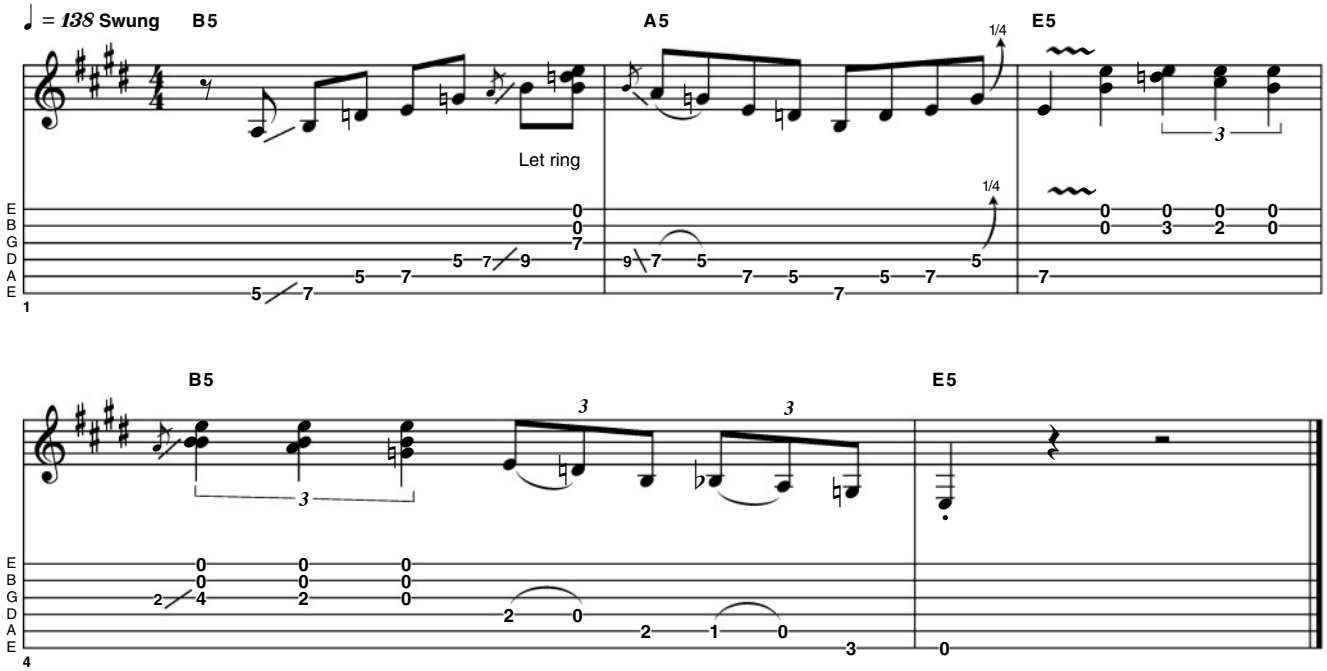
AS MUCH A RIFF AS IT IS A 'SOLO' IDEA, this example establishes itself strongly by starting on the root note before playing around with a stop-start rhythm and moving over to the open strings for bar 2. You could view this as two variations on the same idea, in the same way that a blues vocal often repeats lines for extra emphasis. The backwards rake across the three treble strings in bar 3 gives a nice flourish without sounding too hurried.

Example 2

CHANGING TO THE IV CHORD (A), we're staying very much within the E minor pentatonic, sliding between shapes 1 and 2. Leaving various strings to ring together and playing doublestops adds a certain attitude while fulfilling the practical purpose of filling out the sound – not essential over a backing track like this, but it makes a massive difference when playing unaccompanied. The open fifth string could also be employed as the root before we change back to E in the last two bars.



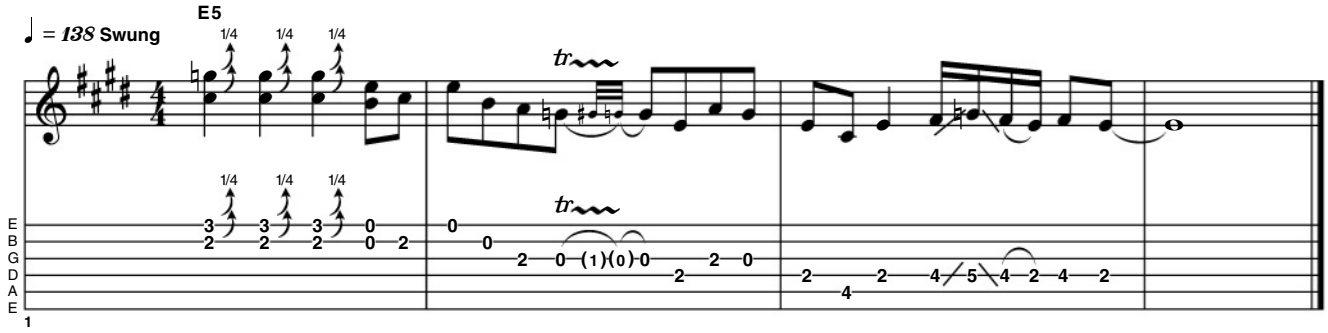
Example 3

SHIFTING TO THE V CHORD (B) is potentially the trickiest part, but I've covered here by digging in on some lower notes and incorporating some ringing open strings. As you'll hear towards the end of the phrase, it's perfectly possible to make the shape 1 E minor pentatonic work here, too, but it's nice to have options. The opening notes could be described as shape 3 E minor pentatonic with a brief slide up to shape 4, if you wish.



Example 4

AN ALTERNATE TAKE on what would be the opening phrase, or perhaps the beginning of the rest of a solo... I'm deliberately leaning on the 6th (C# in this key of E) in the best blues tradition with some quarter-tone 'blues' bends, and even stepping outside the regular pentatonic shape to include another lower 6th at the beginning of bar 3. Players such as Albert Collins and Albert King used alternative tunings, which would make this more likely to fall under the fingers, but this can be reproduced with a minimum of effort.



Hear It Here

JOHN MAYALL & THE BLUESBREAKERS

BLUESBREAKERS WITH ERIC CLAPTON

An obvious choice to get us started, especially *Hideaway*, which goes a little further into modern 'solo' guitar territory than the examples but shows clearly what we've been talking about. However many times you may have heard this, it's always striking to hear the sophistication and precision of Clapton's playing. Also check out *Have You Heard* and *Steppin' Out* for some other ideas, including some different keys, with plenty of great ideas to steal.

HOWLIN' WOLF

THE DEFINITIVE COLLECTION

Citing this album allows us to cherry pick the best examples of what we're talking about, starting with *Moanin' At Midnight*, a band recording but clearly built around the main guitar riff. This was played by Willie Johnson, Howlin' Wolf's guitar player back in 1951. *Smokestack Lightning* is another great example: recorded in 1956, this featured Hubert Sumlin alongside Willie Johnson on guitar. Finally, check out *Spoonful*, featuring Sumlin on lead guitar and riffs from Freddy Robinson.

ALBERT COLLINS

LIVE FROM AUSTIN, TX

Recorded in the early 90s, this collection is a great showcase for Albert's funky inspired lines. We're moving away from the open strings with this, but there are so many interesting and unpredictable licks to explore here (partly due to the unusual tuning Albert used) that this record is well worth picking through. Many of the ideas will translate to the approach we have been looking at, so check out *Mr Collins, Mr Collins* (yes, that is twice!), *Iceman* and *Travelin' South*.

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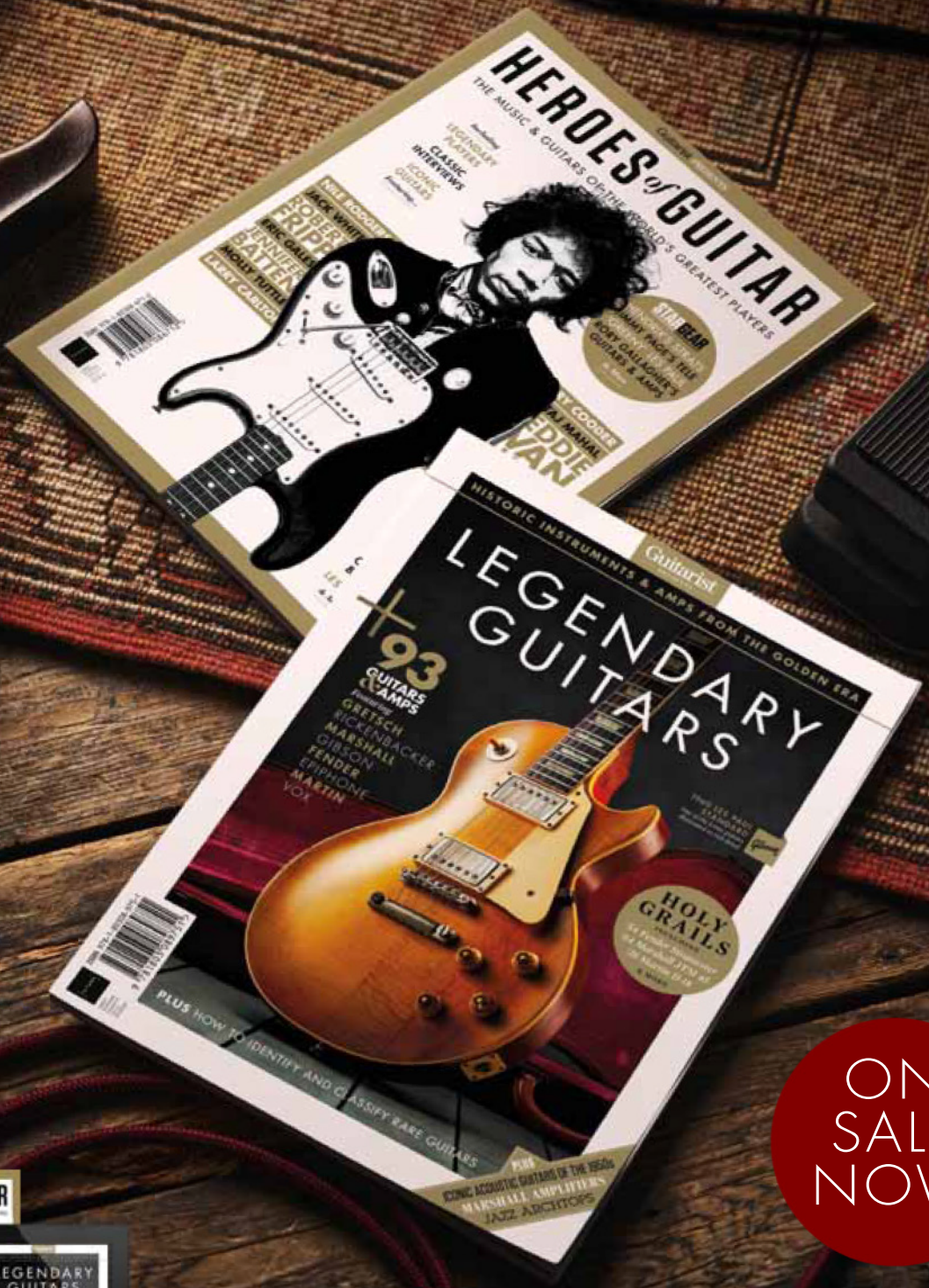

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